

**SHIFTING THE UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF EVANGELISM
FOR INDIVIDUALS IN AN ERA OF CHURCH DECLINE
USING EXPERIENTIAL OUTREACH TRAINING**

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ABSTRACT

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The theme of this doctoral project is helping church attendees begin to shift their understanding and practice of evangelism. The problem it seeks to address is that, in a North American context, using corporate worship gatherings as a primary evangelism tool is increasingly ineffective. It hypothesizes that by offering training on principles and practices of evangelism to church attendees, an increase can be observed in the intention and practice of having faith conversations outside of church and home. Using a test group, results suggest an increase in participants' intention to look for evangelism opportunities and to engage in conversations about faith.

INTRODUCTION

Churches in the United States are declining in attendance and closing at a rapid rate.¹ Within my own United Methodist denomination decline has become a serious issue that leaves the viability of our denomination in doubt within the minds of some.² Many have described the American religious landscape as “post-Christendom.”

“Christendom refers to a framework for construing the relationship between church and state in which the two are fused together for the sake of governance...”³ Philip Jenkins suggests that in an age when states and kingdoms were more fluid, the predominance of Christianity led to European Christians having a primary loyalty to the eternal institution of the church.⁴ This relationship between church and state meant that certain fundamental Christian beliefs were assumed by society. In certain respects, this made evangelism easier, because there were fewer initial barriers to cross. Bryan Stone,

¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” Gallup, April 18, 2019, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>.

² Kenneth J. Collins, “The Ongoing Decline of British and American Methodism: A Modernistic Saga,” *The Asbury Theological Journal* 56, no. 2 (2001), 67-68.

³ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 118.

⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Rev. Ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), xii.

however, argues that this wedding of church and state also “made it easy for the world to be Christian—and the church has been paying the price ever since.”⁵

For some time now this privileged status for Christianity in our culture has been waning. Ours is a “post-Christendom” era. That is, Christianity is not the norm for growing numbers of individuals in America, and its influence on societal institutions and structures is declining.⁶

Given this reality, church leaders and pastors are searching for answers and mechanisms to attempt to reverse the decline and reach new people. Driven by this valid concern, many churches over the most recent decades of American church life have shifted strategies and styles in an attempt to reach an unchurched and de-churched culture. Many times these adjusted strategies have included adjusting corporate worship gatherings to include elements perceived to be more attractive to secular society. What is often labeled the “church growth movement,” anecdotally appears to me to frequently be accompanied by an assumption that culturally adapted worship gatherings are the primary vehicle for evangelism. Evangelistic campaigns of various sorts and styles within previous generations have been largely replaced by pastors and churches attempting to find the right formula for attracting guests on Sunday morning.

I argue that this shift in the understanding and implementation of evangelism, while noble in intention, does not actually prove effective in our church American church context. In the American church, for instance, we have more “mega-churches” (typically defined as churches with 2000 or more in average worship attendance) than any time in

⁵ Stone, 119.

⁶ “Views About Religion in American Society,” Pew Research Center, March 22, 2020, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/03/12/views-about-religion-in-american-society/>.

history, but fewer overall people attending church. According to missiologist Ed Stetzer, “the number of megachurches in America has doubled during every decade over the last half century.”⁷ Over this same time span, many studies, like research from Gallup, have shown the overall involvement of Americans in organized religion to be plummeting.⁸

I believe one underlying impact of the emphasis on reaching people through attractional worship gatherings is the loss of a sense of personal responsibility for evangelism among many church-going Christians. This deviation in both the understanding and actual practice of personal faith sharing has been demonstrated by multiple recent studies. Barna, for instance, has recently shown that younger Christians actually exhibit a negative view of evangelism in general.⁹

Moreover, people are not attending church gatherings as compulsorily as they once did. For example, a major Gallup study has shown that affinity for religious affiliation decreases significantly with younger generations and membership in churches has dropped dramatically.¹⁰ Thus, in order to reach people effectively in this context of church decline, we should reintroduce mechanisms of evangelism that cross cultural barriers and introduce the message of Jesus Christ without expecting a person to first

⁷ Ed Stetzer, “The Explosive Growth of U.S. Megachurches, Even While Many Say Their Day is Done,” Christianity Today, February 19, 2013, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/february/explosive-growth-of-us-megachurches-even-while-many-say.html>.

⁸ Bob Smietana, “Gallup: Number of Americans who belong to a church or house of worship plummets,” Religion News Service, April 18, 2019, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2019/04/18/gallup-number-of-americans-who-belong-to-a-church-or-house-of-worship-plummets/>.

⁹ “Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism Is Wrong,” Barna, February 5, 2019, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>.

¹⁰ Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” Gallup, April 18, 2019, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>.

attend a church service. My hypothesis is that by introducing principles and offering training on basic practices of evangelism to regular church attendees, an increase can be observed in the intention and practice of having faith conversations outside of church and home. I believe this sort of training, which draws upon principles from historic examples of evangelistic practice like early Methodist field preaching, will be key to recovering a Christian witness in this era of church decline. The principles I intend to highlight include: cross-cultural communications, personal evangelism, and critical contextualization.¹¹

While this project is about evangelism, its metrics are not primarily about church growth or numerical conversions. My metrics are narrower. They seek to measure one aspect of evangelism for participants. Christians ought to tell other people about Jesus. Jesus expected his first disciples to tell the nations about him. The history of Christianity has continued their legacy. The fundamental beliefs at the heart of Christianity ought to be so pervasive in the Christian life that spiritual conversations come up normally in conversation. My aim is to measure this particular activity, and the effect of my training on the participants involved in this study with respect to this activity.

I have implemented training designed to result in an increase in the number of intentional spiritual conversations outside of church among participants, as well as a shift towards an understanding of evangelism which includes greater personal responsibility. I

¹¹ While the scope of this work will not allow for highlighting research in each of these evangelism principles, it is important to note that significant work has been done previously in each of these three areas. The Biblical, historical, and theological research I provide is not novel in terms of these principles. Rather, I am attempting to draw out these key principles and apply them in specific ways to my declining United Methodist context. For expertise on these principles, see the work of Paul Hiebert, David Hesselgrave, Lamin Sanneh, Andrew Walls and others.

believe my analysis of the participant interviews and surveys suggest a difference in these two areas for many participants.

I start by sharing some of my own ministry journey and the ways in which God has shaped a passion for evangelism in my life. I also highlight the current evangelism gap in the American church and provide an example from one declining United Methodist congregation. In chapter two I offer a biblical foundation for this project using John 4:1-42. Using Jesus as an exemplar for both the principles behind personal evangelism as well as actual practice, I highlight the need for evangelism that follows in the way of Jesus. In chapter three I turn my attention to history and examine the early Methodist practice of field preaching as an example for the evangelistic principles at the center of the training in this project. In chapter four I review Leslie Newbigin's work on evangelism and mission as the core of the Church's identity. In chapter five I deal with the actual implementation of this project by examining adult education theory and ways in which experience is essential to transformative learning. Finally, in chapter six I share the design and results of my project, with analysis of the effects of this learning on participants over a period of two months.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

I am increasingly convinced that churches across our country are hungry for clear teaching with proven practices on how to reach the unchurched and spiritually lost people in our communities. The issue in American Christianity is not one of a lack of available churches. Unlike some less Christianized places around the globe the American landscape has seen churches planted in nearly every rural, suburban and urban context across our vast land. The current dilemma is not so much about whether we have churches in the vicinity of people, but rather whether churches have the ability to offer the message of the Jesus Christ to the people around them in a way that is compelling, fruitful, and actually reaches the ears of those not already on their membership rolls. In a well circulated 2014 study, Pew Research showed that nearly 23% of the United States population now claim no religious affiliation.¹

Churches face countless decisions each year. Many experiencing decline are faced with financial hardship. In the rapidly changing world of technology churches are forced into decisions about new forms of media, online streaming for worship services, and how best to stay connected with church members increasingly isolated from face-to-face interactions. In Protestant churches there are constant decisions to be made about the

¹ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 1, 2015, accessed December 13, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>.

changing dominant styles of music, instrumentation, and overall structure of services.

What seems to be a less typical conversation in American churches is how we understand evangelism and our ability to interface with those not yet a part of the church.

There is no viable future for any religious movement without the ability to reach new people. Whether through sheer physical reproduction by devout parents or ongoing evangelization, no movement has the ability to transcend the death of its members without some mechanism for passing on the faith. Evangelism is what we have historically labeled the practice of finding means to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. The ministries of teaching, discipleship, service, worship and sacraments are all of unquestioned importance to the church, but no church has the ability to practice any of those ministries without first coming into contact with people who need them. For that reason, evangelism is critical.

In this initial chapter I will highlight the current context where I serve and demonstrate how that need relates to my own spiritual journey to form an appropriate connection point upon which this doctoral project was crafted. I will first identify a general context of current churches in American Methodism by examining some historical trends as well as more recent data. Next, I will highlight a particular example of the sort of churches where this sort of training in cross-cultural communications, personal evangelism, and critical contextualization is desperately needed. Finally, I will share some of my own story and sense of calling to demonstrate how this context intersects with a personal passion to form my project.

Contextual Analysis

Given the scope of my project, there are certain implications for identifying my context. I currently serve as the President of a ministry called Spirit and Truth which is a ministry aimed at church renewal by equipping churches and individuals to share the Gospel and make disciples of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. I work with a variety of denominations, but for the sake of clarity and for the purpose of this project I will limit my assessment to United Methodist Churches. Second, even within the limited denominational scope this training is intended to be used multiple individual settings. Therefore, I do not believe it is sufficient for a contextual analysis to identify merely one local congregation upon which to base my findings. Rather I will attempt to describe more broadly the current status of United Methodist churches in the United States. At the end of this broader reflection, in order to provide at least one more tangible example, I will describe one particular church with which Spirit and Truth has engaged.

Working with Methodist churches around the United States means a variety of contexts and congregational dynamics. Thus, understanding the general arc of American Methodism ought to be helpful in understanding, at least in part, the trajectory of many individual congregations. No two churches are alike, but given the connectional nature of this denomination, each current local expression within the United Methodist Church has been influenced by the larger track of American Methodist history. It is to that track I now turn.

The Meteoric Rise and Consistent Decline of American Methodism

Methodism began as a fringe, and somewhat radical, religious movement when it was first introduced to this side of the Atlantic, but within a remarkably short amount of time it began to experience dramatic growth.

Nathan Hatch presented a presidential address to the American Society of Church History in 1994 entitled, “The Puzzle of American Methodism.” Dr. Hatch notes a puzzling absence of work on American Methodism within serious American religious historical research. In making the case that Methodism should receive more attention, Hatch provides some startling assessments about the uniqueness of Methodism’s rise in the United States.²

According to Hatch, in 1771 the American followers of John Wesley numbered no more than four ministers and 300 lay people, but under the tireless work of Francis Asbury the movement exploded. By 1816, when Asbury died, there were over 2,000 American Methodist preachers and 200,000 members.³

Between 1776 and 1850 the Methodists in America achieved a virtual miracle of growth, rising from less than 3 percent of all church members in 1776 to more than 34 percent by 1850, making them far and away the largest religious body in the nation and the most extensive national institution other than the Federal government.⁴

What started with such meager beginnings had grown to 4,000 itinerant preachers, 8,000 local preachers, and over a million members by the middle of the nineteenth century. And while only 25% to 30% of the population in the U.S. claimed any religious affiliation in 1850, nearly one in fifteen Americans belonged to a Methodist

² Nathan O. Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” *Church History* 63, no. 2 (June 1994): 175-189.

³ Hatch, 178.

⁴ Hatch, 178.

congregation.⁵ In summary, Hatch writes, “Quite simply, Methodism remains the most powerful religious movement in American History, its growth a central feature in the emergence of the United States as a republic.”⁶

While the purpose of this current work is not to assess the reason for such unprecedented growth, it is quite clear that something startling occurred in early American Methodism. It is not hard to imagine that this rise is not exclusively related to societal factors and overarching religious climates. At least in part, it relates to the dynamics, teachings, and methods of that early movement.

The rapid growth observed at the beginning of American Methodism, like nearly all religious movements, would not sustain itself. American Methodism would eventually find itself in continual decline. Dr. David Hempton, in his work *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, helps highlight the numerical slide.

In the United States Methodism ceased to make rapid gains as a percentage of total population around 1860 (though there were modest spikes in the 1870s and 1910s), but it was not until the 1950s that Methodism began its long march of decline as a proportion of all Americans, and not until the 1970s did absolute numbers of Methodists begin to fall.⁷

In 1970, shortly after the merger with Evangelical United Brethren Church, the total membership for the United Methodist Church in the United States was 10,671,774.⁸ The most recent numbers from the UMC General Council on Finance and Administration

⁵ Hatch, 179.

⁶ Hatch, 177-178.

⁷ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 183.

⁸ Hempton, 212.

put that number at 6,951,278 in 2016.⁹ Not only does this represent a drop of over three and a half million members over the span of just forty-six years, but it should also be noted that the population of the United States rose significantly over that same time period. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, it is estimated there were over 323 million residents in 2016¹⁰ compared to just over 203 million in 1970¹¹. So while the total drop in attendance over that time period is nearly 35%, the drop relative to the percentage of U.S. population is even more alarming. In 1970 United Methodists could claim over 5% of the population as members, but by 2016 a mere 2.2%.

This trajectory and efforts to identify root causes are well documented both within and outside of the tradition. Highlighting this reality at this point is not in order to argue for a particular causal theory, but rather to say that any given UMC congregation currently in the U.S. finds itself attached to a denomination with this startling trajectory. This reality affects the context of each local congregation, whether in obvious or more subtle ways. Thinking about an American business as a metaphor, the reality is that a particular branch of the Sears Roebuck Company may be thriving, but when the larger whole is quickly moving towards ultimate closure, no branch, no matter the apparent vitality, is immune to the failure of the mother corporation.

⁹ “Data Services,” General Council on Finance and Administration of The United Methodist Church, accessed December 14, 2018, <http://www.gcfa.org/services/data-services>.

¹⁰ “Annual Estimates of the Resident Population: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2017,” United States Census Bureau American Fact Finder, accessed December 13, 2018, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=PEP_2017_PEPANNRES&src=pt.

¹¹ “Decennial Census of Population and Housing: 1970,” United States Census Bureau, accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade.1970.html>.

In addition to this well-documented numerical decline, another major development affecting local congregations is the current quagmire around the United Methodist Church's stance on human sexuality. In early 2019 a special General Conference has been called for the denomination to try and define a legislative way forward. No matter where one lands on the supposed solutions, or even what one defines as the root problem, there seems to be a general consensus by all sides that there are coming, likely sooner rather than later, real implications at the local church level based on whatever is decided (or not decided for that matter).

To summarize, the only way that a massive denomination finds itself in such decline is when lots of local churches are in decline. The whole is made up of real and concrete parts, namely local congregations. Pursuing the renewal of evangelism in local United Methodist Churches around the country means working amongst those who are feeling the despair of membership loss, institutional turmoil, and sincere questions about the viability of their future.

While this sense of decline may be a defining characteristic for the contexts where I will work, so too is the awareness of early periods of vibrancy. Both quantitatively and anecdotally, as I talk with more pastors around the country, most United Methodist Churches have some period in the past of significant growth. That means there will often be a latent memory of a time when the congregation was consistently reaching new people by a variety of means.

Those two realities, of past growth and current decline, present a sort of tension in many local cases. There is a sense of current distress coupled with a sense of historically-rooted possibility. The goal of this project is to tap into the latter in order to address the

former; to look towards the original DNA of the early Methodist movement, both in England and North America, for practices in evangelism, or at least evangelistic principles, which might point towards a renewed hope for the future in local churches.

The Average United Methodist Congregation in the United States

Given the 2016 statistics of total worship attendance and the number of active congregations, the simple median weekly worship attendance in the U.S. is just over eighty-three persons per church.¹² This median number is obviously affected by very large congregations being included, so the most typical United Methodist Church actually has even less persons per week in worship. Right around 50% of all UMC churches have less than 100 members. And for those reporting less than 100 members the average attendance is just over twenty-five persons per week.¹³ This is significant to realize that approximately half of all United Methodist Churches may be comprised of only a handful of families.

¹² “Data Services,” General Council on Finance and Administration of The United Methodist Church, accessed December 14, 2018, <http://www.gcfa.org/services/data-services>.

¹³ “2016 Distribution Tables,” General Council on Finance and Administration of The United Methodist Church, accessed December 14, 2018, http://www.gcfa.org/media/1302/distribution_tables_2016.xls.

In 2016 there were a total of 77,298 baptisms (both infant and adult) in the UMC.¹⁴ This represents less than two and a half baptisms per congregation when considering the 31,867 active congregations in the United States.

In terms of ethnicity, the United Methodist Church in the U.S. is 90% white.¹⁵ While certainly there are individual examples of multi-ethnic congregations, the statistics demonstrate a fairly homogenous denomination.

A Particular Example: Will Rogers UMC, Tulsa, Oklahoma

One local congregation that will serve as an example for the sort of churches Spirit and Truth engages in this sort of evangelism training is Will Rogers United Methodist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The following is a description of that local context gleaned from the insights of their current senior pastor, Rev. Brian Mangan.¹⁶

Will Rogers UMC was established as a congregation in 1943, having its 75th anniversary this year. When the church began it was on the outskirts of Tulsa, but a housing boom swallowed up the area over time and the church now finds itself well within the city limits. The area where the church is situated is known as Midtown and, as the name suggests, is close to the current geographic center of Tulsa. There are approximately 93,000 people that live within a three mile radius of the church property.

¹⁴ “2016 Distribution Tables,” General Council on Finance and Administration of The United Methodist Church, accessed December 14, 2018, http://www.gcfa.org/media/1302/distribution_tables_2016.xls.

¹⁵ “2016 Membership by Ethnicity and Gender,” General Council on Finance and Administration of The United Methodist Church, accessed December 14, 2018, http://www.gcfa.org/media/1300/lay_2016_-_ethmemgen-1.xls.

¹⁶ Brian Mangan, e-mail questionnaire interview, November 26, 2018.

Referencing data he had collected from an online source, Rev. Mangan shared that he believes that over 60% of the population in their immediate vicinity is not involved with a religious congregation. He suggests that the surrounding population is a mixture of generations and races. Ethnically, Rev. Mangan's research indicated the three mile area around the church to be 61% white, 17% Hispanic/Latino, 12% Pacific Islander or American Indian, 9% African American, and 1% Asian.

The attendance numbers at Will Rogers highlights some of the same trends that I have already unpacked for the UMC in general, however their recent history shows even more rapid decline when compared to the national average. In 1991 the church peaked in average attendance at 524, having grown to one of the top ten largest churches by attendance in the Oklahoma Conference. By 2013 that average was less than half, falling to 251 in worship. The current average worship attendance of Will Rogers UMC is down to 135 persons per Sunday, meaning there has been a decline of over 46% in just the last five years.

By Rev. Mangan's assessment the church finds itself in the same crossroads as our denomination, proud of it's past, but somewhat despaired about its present and future. There seems to be a palpable sense of grief over the church not being what it once was. The embedded sense of a successful past causes both celebration of days gone by and grief over their current status.

Will Rogers currently offers two worship services, each with its own style. Not an uncommon phenomenon in many UMC congregations, a worship debate in the 1980s and 1990s drove the church to believe that a more contemporary style of music would help attract new and younger attendees. That has carried on so that there remains a traditional

and contemporary service, even those the attendance numbers would not necessitate two services based on the size of the church's sanctuary.

Will Rogers currently engages in various sorts of relief ministries or opportunities to provide tangible resources for those in need through food distributions and the like. There does not appear to be any clear strategy employed for offering the message of Jesus Christ in ways traditionally understood as evangelism where the current congregants and/or pastor interface with those not yet a part of the church. In addition, the self-analysis from Rev. Mangan reveals that there is not an identifiable discipleship plan and they primarily rely on formational content delivered through sermons and some limited participation in Sunday school programs.

In terms of outreach, Will Rogers UMC has some self-described legacy to which they cling, but seemingly very little current intentional efforts. In many ways this is appears to be a microcosm of the denomination to which the church belongs. There are internal stories about how the church began in a bar with a small group, certainly a vivid picture of finding tangible ways for the message of Christ to intersect with secular culture, however those discussions all point to things in the rearview mirror. And it is hard to navigate what is in front of you when you are still looking backwards.

It is into these exact sorts of contexts that the efforts of Spirit and Truth attempts to infuse early Wesleyan principles of evangelism. What might occur if a church like Will Rogers were to recapture some of the evangelistic fervor that the church members seem to at least believe was the driving force to start the congregation in the first place? What might change within the church community if lay people started seeing themselves

as ones called to preach the Gospel in ways that intersect with the secular world that surrounds them?

Will Rogers represents only one particular setting for which this work is to be undertaken. Other congregations involved in the Spirit and Truth training are situated in more rural areas. We are currently working with a two-point charge in a sparsely populated region of upstate New York. Politically, geographically, economically, and ethnically those congregations are vastly different than Will Rogers, and yet the theme of a vibrant past which eventually led to a rapid decline still holds true, as it does for hundreds and perhaps thousands of UMC churches across the United States. While many United Methodist congregations can be starkly different, unfortunately when it comes to past growth coupled with current decline, and the loss of early Methodist evangelism practices, many appear very much the same.

My Ministry Journey

My awareness of my own spiritual journey really began in second grade and was situated in a local United Methodist congregation not terribly dissimilar from all that I have just described. My parents started taking me to Englewood United Methodist Church in Englewood, Ohio as an infant. After moving to Piqua, Ohio we started attending Grace United Methodist just around the block from our house.

The first recollection I have of any kind of spiritual decision came in Mrs. Doorman's second grade Sunday school class. One Sunday she shared a simple gospel message with us and talked to us about how Jesus wants to be a part of our lives. I did not understand it fully, but at that moment I knew it was real and I knew that I needed God in

my life. I bowed my head in that crusty old classroom, flannel board leaning along the wall, and asked Jesus to come into my heart. I did not recognize the gravity of what I had done, but something real changed in me that day. It was the beginning.

What began in second grade Sunday School really took off in sixth grade youth group. Grace had a dynamic youth group in those years. As an elementary-aged kid I could only watch the buzz from a distance initially and I counted the days until I could join in the fun. When I got into sixth grade and was allowed to attend I jumped in; all in. Every second the doors were open, I was there. Every activity, trip, or Bible study offered I was the first to sign up. I found a family in that youth group. I found people who loved me. People who talked to me. People who longed to see the best come out of me. I found a home.

Chris Cahall, the sarcastic, football-loving, jock-of-a-Jesus loving youth pastor, became one of the most important people in my life. In hindsight, I am quite sure I wore out my welcome with him. I came early and stayed late. I stopped by the church when no official activity was going on. There were stretches when I think I rode in his car more than my parents'. I do not know what he thought of me. I am not sure whether he just put up with me or saw potential in me. Whatever it was, he chose to love me. He invited me to help lead things. He encouraged me to take steps outside of my comfort zone. I believe he was the first one to really shape a love for evangelism into my life. My current context and ministry focus point directly back to those days in middle school with Chris Cahall.

One of the first distinct experiences I remember was attending a youth rally with Chris called Acquire the Fire. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. Thousands of passionate teenagers audibly cheered for Jesus, worshipped with hands raised, even

opened their Bibles and followed along during the teachings. Something changed in me that weekend. Something about this Jesus I had asked into my life became even more real to me. And it was the first time I remember having this thought. "If this is real. If this God is who he says he is. If the only way to salvation is through Jesus. I can't possibly do anything else with the rest of my life other than tell other people this truth."

Acquire the Fire in sixth grade was the time I started sensing the call. I wouldn't have named it that at the time, but there was a fire that started burning in me that hasn't been extinguished to this day.

Throughout my junior high years my passion for Jesus continued to grow. I started reading my Bible. I started praying more. I started leading and serving in my youth group. And the fire grew.

By the time that I got to ninth grade the sense of calling that started a few years before had grown the point that I could not shake it. It gnawed at me. It was not a burden, but it felt heavy; like the feeling of a major life-altering decision you need to make and will not feel settled until it's done. It felt like something hanging over me that I needed to give in to. Not out of guilt. Not out of pressure. Purely out of a sense of knowing what God was asking of me. Knowing to the core of my being that I was being wooed by my creator. Knowing that God had some kind of plan for me, but I had to be willing to surrender to taking the first step.

That step, the step that would set the trajectory for every day that followed, came in ninth grade. I was attending a church camp at Tarhollow State Park in the hills of southern Ohio. The week was full of fun: pranks, cookies, games and silly skits, all of the stuff that church camps should be made of. And of course Jesus. I experienced good

spiritual discussions around the fire. I remember late night chats in our cabin filled with a mixture of inappropriate remarks that come ever so naturally to a room full of high school boys, and deep heartfelt discussion about things more serious than most of us ever ventured to talk about aloud.

And then it happened. Towards the end of the week we had a special evening worship service at an outdoor amphitheater nestled in the woods. It was a decent walk to get back to that location and anticipation built as we made our way with flashlights. There was a sense of expectation that something special would happen there, at least that is what I sensed in my own heart. When we arrived at what was appropriately labeled “the Green Cathedral” we found that the counselors had started a large bonfire in the stone enclosure towards the front of the seating area. It provided more than enough light for our time of worship. With a guitar, a few simple choruses, and the beautiful sound of over a hundred teenage voices we sang praises to the Lord. Our keynote speaker for the week shared a powerful message on understanding Jesus as the lamb of God. I don’t remember details but I remember the masterful way he wove together Old Testament and New Testament passages in order to bring to life the gravity of Christ’s sacrifice for us. At the end of his message there was a time of prayer. The invitation had nothing particularly to do with becoming a pastor or responding to a call to ministry, but that was what the Lord was doing in me that night.

The Spirit was speaking to me in such a way that I could not have been more convinced had God literally written it in the clouds. In a moment of intense clarity I knew there was nothing I could do but respond with “yes.” I went forward and knelt on the forest floor and I prayed a very simple prayer. The exact words escape me all these years

later, but the essence was simply this, “Lord, I don’t know what all you are asking of me. I don’t know what it looks like to be a pastor or to go into ministry, but I know you are asking me to take that step. So whatever you ask me to do, for the rest of my life, I will do it. Anything you ask, I am yours. I belong to you. I will spend the rest of my life just trying to be obedient to whatever you tell me to do.”

In the simplicity of a ninth grade prayer, and in a step of faith that I did not fully understand, God took ahold of my life and nothing has ever been the same.

It was that night, that providential night in the Green Cathedral, that I truly realized that my life is not my own. Not in a way that felt demeaning or like something was being taken from me. I realized that my life was not own, because it had been bought at a price. I realized my life was not my own, because there was a plan bigger than I could scheme or imagine. I realized that my life was not my own, and in abandoning my need to control it, I took my first drink from the deep well of joy one can only find in total obedience to your Creator.

The next day after that pivotal night gave me an opportunity to witness a little snapshot of my future. As our week at camp drew to a close we had a special service that was filled almost exclusively with testimony. I can still picture the cafeteria-like room we gathered in, used for crafts most of the week, now stuffed with kids gathered around in a semi-circle of old metal folding chairs. A single microphone sat on display atop a shiny stand in the center of the room. It was open mic time, but not for singing, just for sharing.

A steady stream of kids took their turn sharing a mixture of silly exaggerated stories, trying to get a laugh out of their friends, and heartfelt descriptions of ways they had sensed God at work that week.

As one by one kids started to share there was this unsettled burning sensation inside my gut. Something was drawing me, urging me, dare I say forcing me to speak.

If we were to rewind my story for just a moment I might share that as I child I was rather shy. I was never in a hurry, very deliberate, over analyzed almost every word that I said, and did everything in my power to manage the perception of every person who ever met me. I was not socially awkward. I had plenty of friends. But I was a quiet kid; more introspective than verbal. I was not the one to speak up in class. I was not the one to make a joke that might draw attention to myself. I was often alone in my thought life, perfectly content to analyze the world around me without engaging in conversation.

Against that back drop, what happened in me following the Green Cathedral prayer is perhaps even more surprising. An open mic in my younger years would never have enticed me. I avoided being the center of attention nearly at all cost. So, to willingly step up in front of a room full of peers, no matter how moved internally I may have felt, was something I simply would not have done.

And yet that darn Green Cathedral night had messed me up. As I sat there with a burning in my gut I knew that I could not be silent any longer. Not just for that moment, but for the rest of my life, God broke me out of my silence all together.

And so I slipped out of my seat and went forward. I have no idea how long I talked, but what happened next could only be described as my first sermon. I opened my mouth and stuff just started to flow out. There were moments where it almost felt like an out of body experience, like I was watching someone else pour out their passion for Christ to this crowded room. It was exhilarating. I had never felt that free before. I shared

all that had been brewing in me. I made a plea for my peers not to waste their lives on meaningless pursuits but to pursue the God that had always been pursuing them.

You could have heard a pin drop in that moment. It was my first experience of speaking boldly for Christ and having the sense that somehow, in spite of my fears, in spite of my flaws, God's Spirit was working in the lives of others.

After I finished kids started clapping. I remember looking over at this particularly large, jock-type high school boy, who was never one to show emotion, and certainly seemed to cool to be genuinely moved by Jesus. He had tears rolling down his face. He came to me after and shared about how I had touched his life in what I said. I could not believe it. I did not even know what I had said. And yet I knew that somehow the Spirit had already started to hold me to my prayer the night before. I had committed to do whatever God asked. Whatever he asked. And by the next day he put me right into a spot I never wished to be and showed me his power when I step out in obedience. The decision I had made, even though it needed no cementing, was somehow sealed at that open mic night.

High school continued to prove to be quite a formational time in my life. Starting in eighth grade, every year through my senior year of high school I participated in a significant cross-cultural experience. I spent time working in the slums of Monterrey, Mexico. I worked alongside Native American Christians in Oklahoma. I dialogued with crack addicts in the urban center of D.C. But perhaps the most formational trip I experienced was my trip to Amsterdam.

At the time I had never been out of the country. How I convinced my mom to allow a ninth grade boy to cross an ocean with a group of mostly juniors and seniors still

remains a mystery. I was the youngest participant on that Netherlands adventure. And my view of the world expanded tremendously.

I will never forget walking the streets of Amsterdam where heroin was sold in specially marked “coffee shops.” We shared drama ministry about Jesus at the center of the town square. We set up prayer stations at high traffic railways where thousands of commuters came and went. Walking with a large cross and singing praise songs through the heart of the red light district I sensed for the first time in my life the physical weight of pure evil.

In addition to the way that trip enlarged my view of the world, it was also the first time I tasted the fear-inducing, yet thrilling rush of street evangelism. As an introvert, talking with strangers was hard enough, let alone sharing deep things about my faith in Christ. Amsterdam was like the experience I can only imagine it must be when a skydiver steps out of an airplane. (I say “imagine” because I cannot fathom ever willingly jumping out of a perfectly good airplane.) I imagine there is a moment of hesitation, thinking of all that could go wrong, and yet the realization that there is no turning back once you have paid, trained and now find yourself at 13,000 feet. God used that trip to show me the thrill of stepping out in faith and trusting him for the words to witness to the hope that only Jesus can provide, even with complete strangers. The passion I now find for evangelism has seeds that started with Chris Cahall and those two weeks in the Netherlands.

Amsterdam was not far removed from my church camp transformation. The two experiences worked in tandem to provide clarity in God’s direction for my life and the pressing need for that calling. Within a short time it felt as though the Lord confirmed both the “what” and the “why” for my life.

My formation and passion for evangelism and discipleship was only strengthened in college through experiences with Campus Crusade for Christ at Ohio University. I attended OU because of my best friend and scholarship opportunities. There I majored in Mechanical Engineering, fully intending to proceed directly to seminary after graduation.

In Campus Crusade I was shaped to love the Bible even more and my appetite for evangelism continued to grow. I witnessed so much intentionality in their ministry that I had never seen in a church before. They were serious about getting out on campus and sharing the Gospel. After connecting with new students and seeing many come to Christ they had a very clear organization to their discipleship. Upperclassmen discipled underclassmen. Staff discipled upperclassmen. There was serious and accountable weekly Bible studies. Leaders multiplied themselves into other leaders. I had never witnessed anything quite like it and I was hooked. I perceived a seriousness about pursuing the Great Commission that I had never observed in the local church and it was so refreshing. It started a hunger inside of me that lasts to this day to explore how a local congregation could take on that same sort of intentional disciple-making DNA.

The summer after my freshman year I signed up for a summer long mission experience in Wildwood, NJ. We worked normal jobs during the day. I worked behind a cash register at the local K-Mart, but the rest of our time was filled with learning, team building and lots of evangelism. Nearly every night we headed to the board walk where people played games, shopped and ate food right alongside the Atlantic Ocean. It was a fun carnival-like atmosphere. Every evening, with the warm ocean breeze blowing in, there were teenagers and college students everywhere trying desperately to make their summer into something they would always remember.

I remember one particular evening when I was out with a small group and the intention to strike up spiritual conversations with young folks along the boardwalk. As I walked along that night I noticed an unruly group of teenage boys. Six or seven in total, they hollered or whistled at passing girls. Their language, even from a distance, was obviously foul. I was annoyed with them even without sharing a single word of interaction. I continued walking along and judgmentally thought to myself, “What a bunch of punks!”

But then I heard the Holy Spirit whisper, “Go share with them.” The internal argument started. “That’s a stupid idea,” I thought. “They don’t want to hear from me. They don’t care. What a waste of time! And they’ll probably make fun of me.” As my mind raged against the stupidity of the thought of trying to share Christ with those punk teenagers something happened to my feet. I couldn’t walk. “Go talk to them.” I heard it again, but this time I could not move any further. No matter how hard I tried it was as though my feet were glued to the ground. Something took hold of my body and I simply could not walk any further away from that obnoxious bunch.

Feeling a sense of guilt about my attitude, and having a quick flash of that haunting ninth grade prayer in my mind, I gave in and chose obedience as it seemed my only course of action.

When I approached the group it was not long before a few of them wandered off, but there were four that to my utter surprise were almost immediately interested in talking about God. They were intrigued and had real questions. I very quickly realized how foolish my surface view had been. These were boys that were hurting and looking for hope.

I am not sure how long we talked that night on the board walk, I only remember that at some point those four boys came to the point of decision and I invited them to give their lives to Jesus. Four teenage boys, who had not long before been carrying on and whistling at girls, physically knelt down on the board walk and prayed with me to begin their own journey with the Savior.

Later that evening I wept. I wept at my own ignorance and arrogance. I wept because I had almost missed an opportunity with eternal consequences because I was annoyed and afraid. I wept out of joy for seeing again the fruit of obedience, albeit in spite of my reluctance.

That night taught me and shaped me. It showed me again to trust the voice of God more than I trust what seems to make sense on the surface. It taught me again that if I will walk in obedience that the Lord will give me opportunities to see miraculous things. It showed me again the potential impact of taking the Gospel to places where one can encounter folks who may never simply wander into a church.

During my junior year at Ohio University my life took a surprising twist. I had begun to fill the pulpit in a number of churches, and in the midst of one such occasion I was given a unique opportunity to begin serving as a youth pastor. I transferred schools to finish my engineering degree and started my first official ministry position.

In the midst of serving in this capacity, and finishing up my degree, I was also wrestling with the logistics of my calling. I needed to decide on where to attend seminary, how that interfaced with the unique job I had just been given at 20 years old, and where I should align myself denominationaly.

Even though I had grown up in a solid church with some devoted men investing in my life, my observation of the United Methodist Church to that point had left me alarmed. As a young passionate teenager that is why I had often told people I would not stay affiliated. I felt like pursuing my calling to be a pastor it would be silly to jump on a sinking ship, and that's what the UMC looked like to me. I could see the decline. I could see the theological fighting. I did not know the inside of that world like I do now, and yet even from a distance I was concerned.

So while serving as a youth pastor I began researching other denominations. Theologically I was a fairly committed Wesleyan/Arminian so I tended to focus my research on churches in that stream. As an engineering type my mind has always tended towards logical and analytical styles of reasoning. So I did what only made sense to me at the time. I started a master spreadsheet. I chuckle to think of it now, but I wanted to be thorough. I researched doctrinal statements, polity and ordination processes. I perused hundreds of websites, both of the denominations themselves and of churches affiliated with each. I even went as far as to meet with some denominational leaders and pastors outside of the UMC.

But for all my diligent research and all my analysis, I could never find the perfect denomination. I know that will come as a shock to all who read this, but it alluded me. And beyond that, I just never could find any peace in my own spirit about where to land. I had never been more confident of God's call, and yet I had never been more confused on the specifics of how to live that out.

Finally, one day in prayer clarity came, even though it was an answer other than I originally desired. I was praying and passionately asking the Lord for clarity. I needed to

make some concrete decisions on pursuing credentials and where to attend seminary. And what I heard clearly in my prayer startled me. “Why are you running away from the church that shaped your whole life?” the Lord seemed to ask me. “If everyone who believes in holding up the Bible and seeing people come to Jesus leaves, who will be left to help lead the Methodists towards a faithful future?”

“Lord,” I prayed, “I don’t want to do that!”

And then in my mind came again that annoying prayer from ninth grade. “Whatever you ask, I’ll do it.” (What a haunting prayer that has been in my life!) My life is not my own. “Ok, Lord. Whatever you want from me.”

In that moment of prayer I felt as though I was called back to the Methodist church even though I had never really left. Something was birthed in me to become a missionary to the Methodist church, to work for renewal of faithfulness in whatever way possible. That newly discovered nuance to my calling still drives me today and has led directly to the formation of my ministry context, Spirit and Truth.

After serving for three years as a youth pastor, my ministry shifted to adult discipleship. I stayed at the same church and still supervised the new youth pastor, but the church asked me to expand my role and ramp up the efforts of the whole church in making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Following nearly six years of service at that church I was appointed to begin serving as an associate pastor in a larger church in Celina, Ohio. Stepping into my first appointed position within the United Methodist Church brought a new sense of identity. The people in Celina had not known me first as a 20 year old youth pastor in the same

way that the Tipp City congregation had. So with the move came a level of pastoral responsibility that I had never felt before. It was a growing and stretching time.

Just two years into my time in Celina came a very surprising turn of events. The senior pastor who brought me there retired quickly and at an unlikely time of year given the normal Methodist appointment cycle. The conference being left without many options decided to make me the interim lead pastor. In a matter of days I became the primary shepherd of a thousand members and over twenty staff.

It was the first time that this historic and well established downtown church had ever been led by a non-ordained pastor. I believe I was half the age of any senior pastor there since at least 1900. It was an odd situation, one taken note of across our conference. I was ecstatic and terrified all at the same time. It was the sort of role that I always dreamed of, what I sensed the Lord calling me towards, but it came so much sooner and in a different way than what I had scripted out for myself. (For the record, my tidy script has never held true in nearly any area of my life.)

After roughly six months as the interim pastor, our church, which had been declining in attendance for many years and had gone through some rough times financially, started to rebound. We were growing again. Our finances were healthy. And not wanting to disrupt that progress, the interim label was removed and I continued serving as their lead pastor for the next five years.

I learned so much over those years. My congregation was very gracious as I grew in my preaching and leadership. Our church continued to grow and eventually I would navigate the merger of adopting a smaller dying congregation and we would enter the

world of multi-site ministry. We did many good things together and I wouldn't trade those five years for anything. It was a blessed time.

And yet. Yet even with all the blessing and learning that happened there was still an increasing longing in me for something more. Not something more in terms of a bigger church or better programs, actually quite the opposite. By all worldly metrics we were quite successful as a church and I was living into the role I had always dreamed of. We were the largest protestant church in our small county-seat town. We offered better programs and activities than anybody around. But that was precisely it. Even with that kind of "success" it seemed to me that there was a disconnect between what we were as a church and what I read about in the Scriptures. We were the model American church, but something in me was starting to question if the American church was ever going to be the same thing as Jesus' church.

Things were going well, but I was internally restless; not discontent but restless. I was actually content to spend the rest of my life there. It was comfortable for me. The people liked me a lot. We lived in a nice parsonage. Our kids loved the community and schools. It was home for us. There was just some kind of nagging sense deep inside that Jesus was calling me to something more radical than managing a nice program-driven American church.

It was with that sense that I arrived at the New Room Conference in 2016. There I met God in a powerful way. The theme of that Wesleyan gathering was travailing prayer. The multi-day event was a call to pray with longing for another great spiritual awakening in our lives and country. What truly broke my heart there in Tennessee was one presenter who happened to be an Egyptian Christian. She was a trauma counselor and had been

working on the front lines to love families who had been torn apart by ISIS. The stories she shared are still haunting to me. Nearly every one of the thousand plus attendees sobbed that day.

Her closing call was simple, “Wake up!” She talked of a version of Christianity that I have read about in history books but had never seen actually lived in front of me. She spoke of a call to follow Jesus that requires sacrifice, not just playing nice church games. I sat there in utter conviction that while we were planning the next big program to entertain our folks there were people around the world literally choosing between life and death for the sake of Christ. The uncomfortable fervor for evangelism of my youth and college years was stirred in me again.

I returned to my church a different pastor than I had left. That Sunday I scrapped my sermon and shared about my experience at New Room. I was honest and said that I was done just playing nice church games. I challenged my church to get serious about the Gospel; as though we actually believed what we said. I invited our church to come and pray. I asked them to come and pray with me at 6:00am the following Thursday, to ask the Lord to move in a way beyond what we could scheme or plan.

In our current day, prayer meetings are almost impossible in many churches. It is hard to get a handful of attendees, even at a convenient time. So at 6:00am I was expecting maybe three or four folks at most. To my shock that first Thursday morning twenty-five people showed up to pray. Immediately I knew God was up to something.

Over the next several months we would continue to pray together and it was into that season of prayer that we saw God show up in a way we did not expect. During those weeks of prayer we started hearing stories from the county just south of us that sounded

just like all the things we were praying for. We heard of many people coming to Christ.

One testimony included about 18 high school football players giving their lives to Jesus and being baptized together. Churches from multiple denominations were working together. My curiosity was piqued.

That fall we explored and found out that a ministry going by the name of reviveOHIO was working in that county and around the Dayton area. My associate pastor went down to check them out and came back totally on fire. I did not know a lot about the process but it appeared to be a parachurch ministry that was helping to equip everyday folks to share the Gospel, while at the same time serving as a catalyst to help churches work together. As a pure act of faith and based on the testimonies I was hearing I decided to see if we could get them to come to our county.

About six weeks later Revive came to Mercer County. Over twenty churches willingly partnered together with the commitment to better reach our community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The first night our sanctuary that seats 450 was busting at the seams. We sat guests in the choir loft facing the congregation just to use the extra space. Over six hundred folks crammed into our church, only two weeks before Christmas, hungry to see God move.

Over the next week and a half we saw over 300 people come to Christ for the first time during our daily outreaches. Many teenagers and students started to become on fire for Jesus and we were able to share the Gospel at team practices and with school groups. Over 50 people were baptized in those eleven days.

I saw with my own eyes things that resembled what I had read about in the book of Acts. It did not come by way of flash or polish. There were no laser light shows or

world-renown speakers. It came by way of ordinary Christians taking seriously their calling to make disciples. So much of what I longed for in my teenage years and in college I was starting to see. The stories that had always captivated me about the early Wesleyan days of field preaching and class meetings seemed to be taking shape again in our little town. I was hooked. It was a taste of the more I had been looking for.

Revive changed our church and our community. Two years later there is still a group of about a dozen pastors that meet and pray together every week because of the relationships born out of that experience. What I did not anticipate was how much that week and a half would alter the trajectory of my own life.

During that time the Lord began to speak very clearly and directly about the calling on my life. Through people, circumstances, words of prophecy, answered prayers, and especially through my wife, the Lord provided overwhelming confirmation that we were being called to leave the church and become missionaries with Revive.

I fought it at first. I loved what I did and I was quite esteemed for the position I played. We loved our community and were quite comfortable. All that I had ever wanted had come true. How could I throw that all away?

And yet that haunting prayer came back once more. "I'll do whatever you ask." Why did I have to be such a trusting ninth grade boy? Why had I made such a commitment not knowing the cost?

The Lord asked me to leave and there was only one appropriate response. Yes. The clarity came when I realized that by the Lord speaking so clearly that I was faced with only two choices: to leave my church or to live in clear disobedience to Jesus' call. I could not handle the latter. So with very little knowledge of what the future would

hold, my family and I decided to step away from the church we loved and step onto the mission field in a new way.

It felt very much like Jesus had shoved me off of a cliff without a parachute. I had grown accustomed to the world of being a pastor. I think I was decent at it, actually, but I would not be afforded the luxury of that comfort for long. We left the nice parsonage and guaranteed salary to go and raise our own support and work with churches and people all over Ohio.

The transition process took about six months and then I left into the unknown. There were many tears along the way and hundreds of hours of support-raising. Jesus carried me through. Through the heartache of leaving friends, through moving away from the only home my boys had ever known, through it all, Jesus was there.

For the next year I served full-time with reviveOHIO. Alongside a team of committed missionaries, myself and two other chairmen helped lead the way as we took our message to new counties around the state. I was privileged to work with hundreds of churches and see hundreds come to Christ. I saw pastors get revived and start leading their churches towards a new culture altogether. I saw people who had not shared their faith in the decades they had been a Christian start to do that for the first time. I witnessed everyday church folks who had never discipled someone in their life, start to take the Great Commission seriously and meet with someone they could pour into.

It did not come without its messes. Wherever two or three are gathered a mess of some kind is certain to follow. Our team struggled to live out the calling. It is hard work to get churches with such varying theological convictions to rally together. The spiritual

attacks were very real, but all of it was worth it. To see real lives transformed before your eyes because of the work of the Holy Spirit is always worth it.

During my time serving with Revive I continued to stay open to the Lord's leading. I technically sort of froze my credentials with the Methodist Church and went on a voluntary leave of absence. I had no idea how long the Lord would have me serve in this way. I merely was trying to be faithful day by day. I had given up trying to write out my tidy scripts like I had in the past.

While I learned my new role and preached in churches all over Ohio, a parallel track started to develop in my life that I only recently could see with any clarity. As I experienced the thrill of missionary life my heart continued to grow for the Methodist/Wesleyan stream that shaped my whole life and to which I have been called. As I helped people start sharing their faith and get engaged in accountable discipleship, much of what I experienced felt more Methodist to me than most of what I ever experienced in the actual Methodist Church. While this heart and sense of calling to my particular tribe grew, by the grace of God, my path crossed with others who yearned for similar things.

One evening, after Heidi and I had been sensing a strong call to pray more diligently for discernment on our future, I heard the Lord's whisper again that our time with Revive may be coming to a close. Having only served a year in that ministry and not having any sense of what a next step could be, that nudge in prayer left me quite confused. I went to bed that night feeling confused and simply praying that God would show me what he meant.

The next morning at the breakfast table an idea came into my mind that had literally never crossed my consciousness before. I had an idea for a new ministry that would take all that I had been learning in my new missionary role and bring it back into the Methodist world. Something came alive in me at the idea. It was only a spark but I could sense this idea came from a source outside myself. Never once in my life had I contemplated starting a non-profit or beginning my own ministry organization. That breakfast table idea was brand new and I thought I may be from the Lord.

That day at lunch I had a meeting scheduled with a prominent leader and scholar from within our Methodist movement; a man for whom I have great respect. The Lord had allowed our paths to cross nearly a year before and we had been meeting for lunch regularly. I knew instantly that I was supposed to share my ministry idea with him, but internally I argued with myself. “He is really sharp. You can’t think of an idea this big and then share it with someone like him only a few hours later. Think this through a little more first.” But against my own better judgement and rationale I proceeded to share at lunch that day.

“You may think I am crazy,” I started. “Don’t ask me a lot of questions because I just thought of this four hours ago, but here is what I am sensing the Lord is calling me to do.”

To my surprise he did not shoot holes in my idea or tell me all the things wrong with the thought. Instead he spoke life into me. He said, “Not only do I think we need a ministry like that, no one is doing it, and right now is the time to begin.” Then to top it all off, he said, “Matt, if you start something like this, whatever connections I have, in whatever ways I can, I will help you.”

What started as a crazy idea at the breakfast table became a real possibility over one lunch conversation. Immediate confirmation came to my spirit. I went home and shared with my wife, Heidi. To my shock she simply said, “Yea, I think we are supposed to do that.” “Wait a minute,” I said. “Do you understand what I am saying? This is kind of nuts...starting a ministry from scratch, with no promise of anything.” “Yep,” she said, “I think that’s what God has been preparing us for all along.

Somehow in mere moments all that the Lord had done in my life started to come into focus. The years in the Methodist church growing up. The developed passion and experimentation in the areas of evangelism and discipleship. My love for our Wesleyan roots with a sense of a calling in college to call the church back to that place. My time leading a large United Methodist Church and learning local church dynamics. Leaving the church I loved and seeing God move through Revive. All of it, every last bit of it, seemed to culminate in this new call to take a radical step of faith and start something new. Over the course of the next months, Spirit and Truth was born.

The Place of Synergy

Spirit and Truth, and this related doctoral project, are about more than just a nice idea for me. It reflects all that God has done in my life. It flows not simply out of pure need but is a convergence of all that God has shaped into me and the sense of a growing hunger in our churches.

As I tried to demonstrate with brief statistical analysis early in this paper, the United Methodist Church finds itself at a critical juncture. And to reverse the decline there is much work to be done. In particular, one area that seems especially relevant and

in need of attention is the area of evangelism. If Methodists in the United States are going to see a resurgence, they will need more than just evangelism, but it will not happen without evangelism. No religious movement will ever see marked growth without some intentional means to reach those not yet a part of the religious community.

A significant part of my own spiritual journey has related to God stretching me in ways of connecting the Gospel message of Jesus Christ with people not yet a part of the community of faith. Without any conscious awareness at the time, I think the Lord has shaped me and led me into experiences that mirror in principle some of the early evangelistic methods in the Wesleyan revival, while at the same time implanting within me a deep heart for the Methodist movement and a sense of calling to help revitalize churches within its ranks.

Given my own life experience, and cursory understanding of Methodist history, it is my belief that early Methodist field-preaching, linked with an immediate invitation to intentional discipleship in class meetings, may provide, a model and way forward for United Methodist Churches today stuck in decline and desperate to reach new people. Through this project I have learned more about the biblical and historical precedents for evangelism, especially with a historical eye to the early American Methodists, in order to serve the modern church in helping birth new and effective evangelism practices in congregations around the country. With this aim, not only have I sensed a tangible need within the context of United Methodist Churches in the United States, but I have sensed a deep tie to my own calling and spiritual journey.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Evangelism begins for Christians with the example of Jesus himself. In order to demonstrate some of the principles driving this project and some of the ways Jesus demonstrated these in his life, I now turn to one example in John 4:1-42. My hypothesis relates to training individuals to intentionally look for opportunities to engage in faith outside of the church and home. This requires some basic understanding of cross-cultural communication and critical contextualization which will be highlighted through the ministry of Jesus in this passage. In this text the gospel writer highlights an exchange between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. The dialogue, representing the longest dialogue between Jesus and a single person recorded in the Gospels, occurs as Jesus has left Judea and is on his way back to Galilee.

With a critical look at the context of this encounter I hope to illuminate Jesus' intentional act to cross cultural boundaries and share his message with a woman very unlikely to hear that message in a more traditional Jewish religious setting. I will argue that this encounter underscores Jesus' mission to take the Gospel across cultural barriers and offer the truth God in contextual ways. In the field of evangelization this is often

called critical contextualization.¹ For those interested in following in the way of Jesus, I will make the case that these same principles are necessary for evangelism today.

Biblical Context of John 4:1-42

While the fourth Gospel does not bear the author's name (like the other Gospels it is technically anonymous), the title "According to John" was attached to this writing as soon as the four Gospel books started circulating together. Though there is always critical debate among scholars, there is virtually unanimous external evidence pointing to this book being authored by the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee.²

The overall structure of the Gospel of John is fairly straightforward and acknowledged as such by many scholars. After the prologue of 1:1-18 the remaining space through the end of chapter 12 is given to the public ministry of Jesus. Chapters 13-21 outline the final week of Jesus life eventually leading to his death and resurrection.³ Given this simple structure, chapter four then finds itself situated in the early portion of John's attempt to highlight keys of Jesus' public ministry.

The Apostle John frames the central theme of his unique gospel in his famous poetic introduction. Linking his text back to the beginning of Genesis, John begins to lay out a gospel narrative that will confirm Jesus' messiahship and repeatedly highlight his divinity. After situating his gospel via this introduction, John then moves to underscoring

¹ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 17-18.

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 68.

³ George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), xc.

Jesus' link to John the Baptist which then flows very quickly into Jesus calling his first disciples. By chapter two John is already demonstrating Jesus' supernatural power in his first miracle of turning water into wine and by chapter three the gospel writer is already bringing his readers to a point of seeing the individual and cosmic significance of Jesus in God's salvation plan through Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus.

The pericope under scrutiny in this chapter begins in John 4 but is strongly linked to all that precedes it. C.H. Dodd suggests that chapters two through four actually form one thematic unit he labels, "The New Beginning." He argues that John unfolds a basic theme that all has been made new in Christ. Water is replaced with wine. A new temple is foretold. With Nicodemus Jesus talks of new birth, and with the Samaritan woman he contrasts the well of Jacob with new living water. By making this thematic argument Dodd suggests that John outlines two significant actions (water to wine and clearing the temple) followed by two parallel discourses developing their significance respectively.⁴

If Dodd's thematic assessment is right, the dialogue with the woman at the well and surrounding explanatory writing from John function to underscore the theme of a new temple. Jesus' conversation with this woman move beyond just the personal ministry and prophetic insight he offers to an individual and speaks into the larger mission of Jesus which includes non-Israel as well as the nature of true worship in this new kingdom he is inaugurating.

John 4:1-42 is a lengthy text, including lots of dialogue and multiple themes. Overall it gives us insight into something about the personal ministry practices of Jesus,

⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1953), 297.

Jesus' intentional inclusion of crossing accepted Jewish boundaries in his ministry, and Jesus' larger vision of worship and life in the Kingdom of God through the Spirit.

Exegesis of a passage so lengthy and multifaceted is significantly complex. For the sake of this chapter and in order to keep an appropriate scope relative to this project, the remaining space will focus on how this text relates to Jesus' ministry in non-typical Jewish settings and how this interaction led to a spiritual conversion of this woman, and in turn, others in her town.

Structure and Setting

George R. Beasley-Murray offers a basic structure for John 4:1-42 that understands this passage to be dominated by two dialogues of Jesus.⁵ Verses 1-6 serve as the introduction. Then verses 7-26 highlight the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Within this first dialogue the reader finds two themes: the living water offered by Jesus and the worship the Father seeks. The second section of dialogue is between Jesus and the disciples and comes in verses 31-38 which is situated between two explanatory paragraphs (verses 27-30 explaining the woman's testimony to her townspeople and 39-42 concluding with their conversion).

The introduction to this text has Jesus leaving Judea and heading back to Galilee. The idea of going again to Galilee is an allusion to John 2 and Jesus' attendance at the

⁵ Beasley-Murray, 59.

Cana wedding and brief stay in Capernaum.⁶ John suggests Jesus' motivation is related to the Pharisees knowledge of his baptism ministry and its increase even over that of John the Baptist.

Perhaps the most intriguing and debated verse in this introductory paragraph is found in verse 4. "But he had to go through Samaria." (John 4: 4, [New Revised Standard Version]) What does John mean by saying Jesus *had to go* through Samaria? The Samaritan context obviously proves central to the entire well encounter, so understanding Jesus' motivation for arriving there is key.

Geographically, the most direct route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria. Many commentators look to Josephus here and note that it would only take three days by this shorter route. Leon Morris suggests, "The necessity for Jesus to pass through Samaria was not absolute. Strict Jews, like the Pharisees, disliked the Samaritans so intensely that they avoided their territory as much as possible." Morris and others cite Josephus as saying, "for rapid travel, it was essential to take that route."⁷ There did exist a different route through the region beyond the Jordan. It was considerably longer, but avoided contact with Samaritans. Accordingly, those Jews not as strict in their avoidance of Samaritans went through Samaria, and for those in a hurry the shorter path was a necessity.⁸

⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 145.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Revised Ed. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 226.

⁸ Morris, 226.

There is no indication in this passage, however, that Jesus was in a particular hurry, or at least one that could not be adjusted as demonstrated in verse 40 when he stays two additional days at the request of the Samaritans.⁹ Given this basic fact, many scholars suggest that the necessity of Jesus going through Samaria relates more to his mission than a particular geographic reality. In fact, John uses the same word here translated “must” or “had to” in reference to the necessity of various components of Jesus’ mission many other places in this Gospel (3:14, 9:4, 10:16, 12:34, 20:9).¹⁰ There is a sense of drivenness and intentionality to this route choice by Jesus. He must proceed through Samaria, not for time’s sake, but for the sake of his mission.

Cultural Barriers

Of tremendous importance to the meaning of this passage is understanding the cultural barriers that Jesus was crossing to enter this dialogue with a Samaritan woman. Craig Keener identifies three primary barriers crossed in this exchange: 1. a moral barrier, 2. a gender barrier, and 3. a barrier between Jews and Samaritans.¹¹

Traveling through Samaria the dialogue begins as Jesus comes to a Samaritan town called Sychar and more specifically as he comes upon Jacob’s well there. Verse 6 notes that it was noon. Jesus and his disciples would have been traveling for about six hours had they started their journey at daybreak.¹² This explains his being tired and

⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 589.

¹⁰ Morris, 226.

¹¹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 591-601.

thirsty. Also, this is intriguing because of the woman's choice to come and draw water at the hottest part of the day. Keener suggests this encounter would leave the early readers of John's gospel surprised that this woman had come to the well alone.¹³

Despite Jewish insults to the contrary, Samaritans were indeed very religious and took a woman's sexual immorality seriously.¹⁴ Keener states, "Jewish men disdained marrying sexually immoral women who had defiled their bodies, and Samaritans probably followed the same practice."¹⁵ Therefore, this Samaritan woman, knowing what we later find out about her perilous history with relationships, is likely seen as quite immoral amongst her Samaritan peers.

Beyond the moral stigma she likely has among her own people, from the Jewish perspective of Jesus the moral issue goes even deeper. Even without knowing her past many Jews may assume this woman to be morally corrupt. "Jewish people often viewed Gentiles as sexually immoral. A late line or rabbinic tradition even suggests that one should assume virginity only in a female proselyte who is under the age of three years and one day; otherwise one takes one's chances!"¹⁶ Whether among Gentiles or their own people, moral failings in the area of sexuality were a major offense to Jewish people at this time.

¹² Köstenberger, 147.

¹³ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 593.

¹⁴ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 593.

¹⁵ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 593.

¹⁶ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 594.

In this particular case it is not entirely clear whether or not this woman had been committing adultery, but for one reason or another five husbands had found some grounds for divorce and she was currently living with a man who was not her husband.¹⁷ “Even Gentiles without much Jewish or Christian influence would have negatively regarded this woman if they regarded her as immoral.”¹⁸

In addition to the moral standing of this woman in general there is also a cultural issue that rises from Jesus approaching her as a single Jewish man. Jewish teachers warned clearly against interaction with people living overtly sinful lifestyles.¹⁹ And the bottom line is that other ancient accounts even show that asking for water such as Jesus is doing could be seen as flirting, especially given this woman’s apparent reputation.²⁰

Of course we know from other gospel accounts of Jesus ministry that he often interacted with people considered immoral by religious or cultural standards, but this setting seems to put Jesus in an even more precarious situation than we often find. Jesus is in a one-on-one setting, specifically addressing a woman of immoral repute in such a way that could be seen as a mild advance. This broke all the rules of Jewish piety. In fact, the important Jewish history of Isaac and Jacob meeting their prospective wives in such a setting created a precedent of caution among devout Jews for exactly this scenario.²¹ And

¹⁷ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 595.

¹⁸ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 595.

¹⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 596.

²⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 272.

²¹ Köstenberger, 148.

in spite of all the cultural pressure to avoid this exact sort of conversation, Jesus proceeds to address this woman anyway.

The barrier between Jesus and this woman was not only moral in nature. There was also a clear divide based on gender. You can see the embedded issue within the surprised reaction of his disciples when they arrive. “Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman...” (John 4:27) Some have argued, in spite of this explicit comment about the disciples, that there is no issue here and that the gender divide is overblown given the Samaritan context.²² The argument is overshadowed by the large number of commentators who highlight significant evidence pointing toward a gender issue. Beasley-Murray, for example, cites Jewish rabbinical writings with clear statements such as, “One should not talk with a woman on the street, not even his own wife, and certainly not with somebody else’s wife, because of the gossip of men.”²³ Morris even expands this thought by including a previous portion of this rabbinical saying, “A man shall not be alone with a woman in an inn, not even with his sister or his daughter, on account of what men may think.”²⁴ Schnackenburg and others comment on verse 27 to note that the disciples surprise is noted to be specifically with regard to gender, interestingly, rather than religion or race. Even so, the disciples do not question their teacher, likely having already been conditioned by other ministry interactions to know that Jesus must have a reason for his unlikely conversation.

²² Robert Gordon Maccini, “A Reassessment of the Woman at the Well in John 4 in Light of the Samaritan Context.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 16, no. 53 (April 1994): 39.

²³ Beasley-Murray, 62.

²⁴ Morris, 242.

Compounding the moral and gender barriers at play is perhaps the most frequently highlighted issue in this conversation relating to the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. One does not even have to do any extensive extra-biblical contextual analysis for this barrier to become evident, because the conversation between Jesus and the woman actually surfaces this issue clearly in the text itself. Following Jesus asking for a drink the Samaritan woman's first response is, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:9) This statement is followed immediately by a parenthetical comment from John stating, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans."

This explanatory comment from John points to the great divide existing between Jesus and this woman, and again highlights the uniqueness of Jesus feeling compelled to travel through this Samaritan region. In general Jews sought to avoid contact with Samaritans, depending on the locale, class, education and other factors. More specifically, while some Jews would eat with Samaritans, many would not for fear of ritual defilement. Köstenberger notes, "Samaritans were thought to convey uncleanness by what they lay, sat, or rode on, as well as by their saliva or urine."²⁵ Jewish law likely would have made even the vessel that she would retrieve this drink to be considered unclean.²⁶

The hostilities between Jews and Samaritans stemmed from several historical developments and was not only held by Jews towards Samaritans, but was also

²⁵ Köstenberger, 149.

²⁶ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 272.

reciprocated by Samaritans towards Jews as well.²⁷ Ridderbos summarizes the historical divide this way:

The Samaritans were descendants of Israelites from the ten tribes who were left behind after the destruction of Samaria in 722 B.C. and colonists from the East imported by the Assyrian kings. They accepted as authoritative only the five books of Moses and worshipped the God of Israel on Mount Gerizim, rejecting Jerusalem as the place of worship. Along with these religious differences were a number of political conflicts between Jews and Samaritans over the centuries. All this led to what the Evangelist calls, speaking in general terms, “no dealings.”²⁸

A well known book of Jewish wisdom at the time declared that God hated “the foolish people” living in Samaria, no less than he hated the Edomites and Philistines.²⁹ Beyond the potential contamination of the conversation, or using a Samaritan’s vessel to drink water, Keener even suggest that sending his disciples into a Samaritan city for food may have seemed impious to traditional Palestinian Jews.³⁰ All of this to say, the barrier between Jesus and this woman due to the divide between Jews and Samaritans would have included deep rooted feelings and cultural mores with many years of compounding animosity.

Leon Morris sums up the overall divide this way, “Nicodemus was an eminent representative of orthodox Judaism. Now John records an interview Jesus had with one who stood for a class that was wholeheartedly despised by orthodox Judaism. From the

²⁷ Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 154.

²⁸ Ridderbos, 154.

²⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 599.

³⁰ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 600.

point of view of the orthodox Jew there were three strikes against her: she was a Samaritan, a woman, and a sexual sinner.”³¹

Content of the Dialogue

Given the necessarily limited scope of this chapter and the length of this passage I will not attempt to assess in detail all that is contained within the actual dialogue between Jesus and the woman. I will, however, highlight here some basic themes that emerge.

The first theme is the conversation around water. After asking for a drink, and being rebutted by the woman raising the obvious cultural concern, Jesus immediately shifts the conversation from physical water to a spiritual teaching. He responds, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” (John 4:10)

F. F. Bruce writes, “In the sign of Cana (John 2:6) and in the conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:5) water has already figured in a spiritual sense. Here water in Jacob’s well, symbolizing the old order inherited by Samaritans and Jews alike, is contrasted with the new order, the gift of the Spirit, life eternal.”³² In Jeremiah 2:13 God refers to himself as “the fountain of living water.” And living water is an important distinction from stale or still water. Springs in the desert were nothing short of a true source of life. The prophets even associate living water with an eschatological blessing. For example in Zechariah we see this language, “On that day living waters shall flow out

³¹ Morris, 225.

³² F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 104.

from Jerusalem..." (Jeremiah 14:8) in the midst of a vision pointing to ultimate victory for Israel.³³

Given this powerful language used by Jesus and its link to other uses of water in the scriptures, Kevin Vanhoozer suggests that Jesus' concept of living water likely has two possible meanings: 1. Living water represents the revelation Jesus gives (or is) that will lead to eternal life., 2. Living water refers to the Holy Spirit.³⁴

John 7:37-39 has strong language about living water and also makes the direct link between water and the Holy Spirit. In referencing this later passage in John, Vanhoozer notes, "The point is clear: our receiving the Spirit or living water is a consequence of Jesus' death and exaltation." Shortly after he goes on to say, "I see no reason why Jesus could not have intended "living water" to refer to both possibilities--to spirit and to truth—the same two factors he later invokes as conditions for right worship."³⁵

The bottom line is that in the midst of his controversial conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus used a metaphor readily available because of their setting at Jacob's well to find a compelling way to communicate the truth and power of the good news of the Kingdom of God directly to this woman. While embedded with deep symbolism, Jesus in the most basic sense, creatively communicates the Gospel message with this woman in a way linked to their immediate context.

³³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Worship at the Well: From Dogmatics to Doxology (and Back Again)." *Trinity Journal* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 6.

³⁴ Vanhoozer, 6.

³⁵ Vanhoozer, 7.

The second theme that emerges relates to the nature of true worship. This topic surfaces comes when the conversation turns after it is clear that this woman does not initially understand the metaphor Jesus is employing. In some ways this is similar to the interaction found two chapters later in John 6 when Jesus speaking to Galileans speaks of life-giving bread from heaven and they respond to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” (John 6:34)³⁶

With the woman’s misunderstanding Jesus turns the conversation with an abrupt change of subject. This immediately leads to Jesus calling out some of this woman’s stigma relating to husbands (again, which may have led to their meeting at this hour in the first place). Jesus appears to intentionally change the conversation in order to bring this woman’s sin into the open³⁷, but beyond that he begins by way of supernatural knowledge about her life to reveal to the woman what he meant by his offer of living water.

Jesus forces the woman to realize that he is not some ordinary Jewish man.³⁸ Immediately the woman realizes something beyond the natural is at play and responds, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” (John 4:19)

Interestingly, following this confession the woman raises another theological issue, namely the difference in understanding about the location of appropriate worship for Jews and Samaritans. Commentators have various takes on this theological insertion

³⁶ Bruce, 106.

³⁷ Morris, 234.

³⁸ Morris, 235.

from the woman and many suggest this is an attempt at distraction away from her personal sin. However, D. A. Carson has this take:

The sudden change of subject has prompted many interpreters to suggest that the woman raises a disputed point of theology as a means to distract Jesus from the sin-question she finds so embarrassing. It is always easier to talk theology than to deal with truth that is personally distressing. But this interpretation may be guilty of too greatly ‘psychologizing’ the text. A simpler supposition is that the woman’s discovery that Jesus is come kind of Jewish prophet prompts her to raise the outstanding point of theological contention between Jews and Samaritans, as much to demonstrate her religious awareness as to set the stranger a testing challenge.³⁹

Making this point, F. F. Bruce suggests that, “There are some people who cannot engage in a religious conversation with a person of a different persuasion without bringing up the points on which they differ.”⁴⁰

In response to this latest objection, Jesus again shifts the conversation to a different plane. He earlier moves from talk of physical water to living water, now he takes her traditional question of physical worship location and shifts the discussion to the nature of the worshipper rather than geography of the act itself. In a famous pronouncement Jesus states,

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:21-24 NRSV)

Much has been written and argued about the meaning of Jesus’ statement on worship and its ramifications for Christian worship today. I will not dive into that arena

³⁹ Carson, 221-222.

⁴⁰ Bruce, 108.

here, but rather simply point to the way in which this portion of the dialogue continues to highlight Jesus' identity. His ability to articulate God's eschatological vision for worship is tied to the authority of his messiahship that he is in the process of revealing to this woman. In a situation saturated with geographic implications, Jesus does not deny those realities (clearly acknowledging the distinction between Jews and Samaritans in verse 22), but again pushes the conversation towards matters of the heart and spiritual implications beyond the immediate context.

In a final stamp of his identity, relating to the overarching theme in John of Jesus' divinity, Jesus very simply affirms himself as the Messiah in verse 26 just before the disciples re-enter the scene.

For all the back and forth between Jesus and this woman the impact is clear by her response. Ironically, the woman who first went to the well with the intention of being alone, goes to fetch her fellow Samaritans to come and see Jesus. In verses 28-29, John writes, "Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'" (John 4:29-29) The woman seemingly ashamed of her life and taken back by this unknown Jew talking with her alone, now boldly invites others to come and meet the one who clearly was no ordinary man.

Turning from the encounter with the woman while she goes to converse with the townspeople, Jesus is rejoined by the disciples in verses 27-38. In this brief dialogue in verse 34-38 John reveals something of the true scope and significance of what we see Jesus doing specifically with this one woman. Dodd states, "His mission is, not only to teach or to 'announce', but to complete the work of man's salvation; that is, in terms of

the various parts of this episode, to effect the transformation of water into wine, to raise the new temple, to bring (through His descent and ascent) the possibility of birth [in the Spirit], to give living water which springs up to life eternal--in a word, to open to mankind a truly spiritual or divine life.”⁴¹

In a fitting conclusion starting in verse 39, John helps summarize the final consequence of Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” (John 4:39-42)

What started with a single unlikely conversation, John records has now become the conversion of many Samaritans. What began with an unlikely path into Samaria, now has Jesus staying multiple days for ministry. The final declaration of the Samaritans, “we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” proves to be a fitting conclusion not just thematically with chapter 4 and the well dialogue, but to all the episodes contained in chapters two through four.⁴²

Important Themes

While lengthy and complex, this passage helps surface some very basic theological themes that relate to the larger work of John’s gospel. First, in this pericope we see the revelation of Jesus as the one who quenches every thirst, and therefore the

⁴¹ Dodd, 316.

⁴² Dodd, pg. 317.

Evangelist shows us the One to which all evangelism must point. Fitting neatly within the overall theme of John's work we see that this entire episode increasingly reveals the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. Jean-Louis Ska captures this well:

In fact, the chapter is a gradual revelation of Jesus, the central character of the scene and the only one present from beginning to end. The Samaritan woman sees in Jesus a Jew (4,9), then she wonders and asks if he could be greater than Jacob (4,12). Soon afterward she calls him a prophet (4,19). Jesus reveals to her that he is the Messiah (4,26) and the Samaritan woman invites the villagers to come and see if indeed he is (4,30). The chapter ends with this declaration by the inhabitants of Sychar to the Samaritan woman: "We have heard for ourselves and we know this is truly the Savior of the world" (4,42). The progression from each affirmation to the following one is clear.⁴³

John shows Jesus as the one who has come to fulfill the longings of each individual heart, like that of this unnamed woman, and on a grander scale, to accomplish God's ultimate ends for all of creation. Jesus is the source of life on an intimate level with a single human heart, and on a cosmic level for both Jews and non-Jews who will be drawn together in true worship, not characterized by mere geography, but worship in Spirit and in truth. And second, but related to the first, I believe this passage highlights the nature and scope of Jesus' salvific mission.

Schnackenburg in his opening comments on John 4 offers several reasons why John seems to take such special interest in this one incident in Samaria. First, he suggests that against the backdrop of the "superficial, miracle-hungry faith of the Jerusalem crowds" and other religious elites, the faith of "the half-pagan Samaritans" who so readily accept Jesus is striking. Second, he notes that in the course of this particular

⁴³ Jean Louis Ska. "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (John 4): Using the Old Testament." *Landas* 13, no. 1 (1999): 82.

dialogue Jesus can disclose his mission to the entire world which becomes a theme throughout the rest of John's book.⁴⁴

One interesting note is the way in which this account parallels Old Testament accounts at wells. Ska notes that John 4 connects to marriage related accounts in the Old Testament, using a structure similar to that of an encounter with a future spouse near a well, but also drawing on Hosea 2, the story of an unfaithful wife. Ska suggests that we ought to situate this John 4 narrative in the track of Hosea and the unfaithful wife. "She must find her one true husband, just as Samaria ought to find or re-discover her one true God."⁴⁵ Ska offers this conclusion, "Jesus comes to restore this marriage, this broken alliance, and the Samaritans are the first ones to reveal the unsuspected depths of this salvation which now extends to the whole universe."⁴⁶

Jesus comes to the well as one seeking a different sort of bride, a bride that will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.⁴⁷ In this vein, Augustine writes, "It is pertinent to the image of the reality that this woman, who bore the type of the church, comes from strangers, for the church was to come from the Gentiles, an alien from the race of the Jews. In that woman, then, let us hear ourselves, and in her acknowledge ourselves and in her give thanks to God for ourselves."⁴⁸ If this Samaritan woman is seen as a type for the

⁴⁴ Schnackenburg, Rudolf. *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol 1, Herder's Theological Commentary on the New Testament (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1968), 419.

⁴⁵ Ska, 92.

⁴⁶ Ska, 93.

⁴⁷ Vanhoozer, 7.

⁴⁸ Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 1-10*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol. New Testament 4b, edited by Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 146-147.

church, as Augustine notes, then this encounter certainly acts to illuminate Jesus' mission to reach beyond the scope of the Jewish people and bring salvation to the world. Again, this proposed intentional for John's attention to this encounter can be confirmed by looking at the summary statement of the Samaritan villagers in verse 42.

In this one encounter we see Jesus model and begin to embody the same mission he will leave the church in Acts 1:8. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Conclusions Related to this Project

In the most basic sense this John 4 narrative ought to encourage the Church today to embrace the intentionally evangelistic motivation demonstrated by Jesus with the woman at the well. In an article on local church evangelism, John Stott mentions John 4 as an example of personal evangelism. "Ever since Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar and Philip sat beside the Ethiopian in his chariot, personal evangelism has had impeccable biblical precedents."⁴⁹

Jesus prefigures the mission he will give the church in Acts to become witnesses in the immediate geographic context while spreading even to the ends of the earth. His intentional choice to travel through Samaria, when some devout Jews would have clearly avoided it, points towards a resolute intention to reach beyond the more culturally acceptable confines of Judaism. Certainly this must have been motivated by his Father's

⁴⁹ John R. W. Stott, "Christian Ministry in the 21st Century Part 2 (of 4 parts): The Church's Mission in the World." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, no. 579 (July 1988): 244.

mission. For it is the very next chapter in John 5 when Jesus states clearly, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.” (John 5:19) But in addition to obedience to his Father’s will, it also seems clear that Jesus was motivated by love for this particular woman. In an isolated conversation, Jesus takes time to speak directly into the life circumstances of this Samaritan. He does not begin his ministry in Samaria by preaching to a crowd, but embodies the larger message of salvation in a very personal way to this one individual. By focusing at such length on this one interaction, John seems to point to the deeply personal impact of Jesus’ kingdom message, while at the same time, given this woman’s Samaritan identity, highlighting the universal aim of God. For the church to be faithful to their mission from Jesus, we too must learn to live out these same personal and universal salvific intentions. As Jesus does only what he sees the Father doing, as the bride of Christ we must learn to do just what we see Jesus doing. John 4 supplies a theological foundation for the evangelization of the world in the context of a deeply personal example of Jesus already modeling that mission.

A second application to this particular project emerges in the impetus found in John 4 to cross culturally imposed boundaries for the sake of offering the life-giving Gospel to people in their own natural contexts. In short, John 4 shows disciples of Jesus the importance of taking the message of the Kingdom to people right where they are, rather than expecting them to come to us.

Clifford Horn draws on John 4 to offer these four principles for communicating the Gospel cross-culturally: 1. The well is a place for equality, we ought to come with humility. 2. The well is a place of sharing. Jesus comes with his own physical need and

finds common ground to address a spiritual need in the woman. 3. The well is a place of discovery. It becomes a place of naturally “gossiping the Good News.” 4. The well is a place of tension and learning, where Jesus and the woman have to reckon their differences but discover something beautiful in the tension.⁵⁰

Horn writes, “There will be those who will ask: ‘Why bother with cross-cultural mission? Don’t go to the well. They know we are here; if they want us badly enough, they will find us.’ The disciples asked Jesus: ‘Why are you talking to her?’ Motives will be questioned. But if you are the one sitting at the well, you know you have no other choice.”⁵¹

While examining the passage above I attempted to pay special attention to the various ways Jesus intentionally crossed barriers in order to reach this woman. In a similar way, John 4 calls us to cross barriers to take the gospel of Jesus to others. Christians, called to proclaim the gospel to the world, ought to feel compelled to take the burden of communicating across those barriers upon ourselves. The Samaritan woman had serious spiritual need, however she clearly did not know where to find the Living Water. It was Jesus who bore the burden of entering “enemy” territory and employed both relatable metaphorical teaching and supernatural revelation to bring the good news she needed. This is the nature of incarnational ministry. Jesus moved onto her turf, not expecting her to find him. We must follow his example. The church is made up of sent ones. Like Jesus in John 4, we go and find those who are lost, rather than waiting

⁵⁰ Clifford W. Horn, “Communicating the Gospel Cross-Culturally.” *Missio Apostolica* 2, no. 1 (May 1994): 42-44.

⁵¹ Horn, 44.

around for them to stumble into our comfortable religious settings. John Stott says it powerfully this way,

The church's mission is to be modeled on the Son's. "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you," Jesus said (John 20:21). So believers are to enter other people's worlds (which is the implication of incarnation), as Christ entered theirs. That means entering their thought world and the world of their alienation and pain. As Ramsay has written, "We state and commend the faith only in so far as we go out, and put ourselves with loving sympathy inside the doubts of the doubting, the questions of the questioners, and the loneliness of those who have lost their way."⁵²

Finally, in John 4 we see a beautiful example of how anyone changed by the living water can become an evangelist. Real evangelism always multiplies, and we see that happen swiftly and powerfully with this woman. She was not in need of great training or long seasons of discipleship before she was able to point others to Jesus. She moves from being the recipient of Jesus' outreach to becoming an evangelist herself almost instantly. There were no special tricks or training. She needed only to know that Jesus spoke life into her and from there she immediately bears witness to others of the power she encountered.

Abandoning her pitcher she brings not water but grace back to the city. She seems, indeed, to return without a burden, but she returns full of holiness. She returns full, I say, because she who had come as a sinner goes back as a proclaimer, and she who had left her pitcher behind brought back the fullness of Christ, without the slightest loss to her city. For even if she did not bring water to the townspeople, still she brought in the source of salvation.⁵³

In John 4 Jesus demonstrates clear resolve at fulfilling the salvific worldwide mission of God, which necessarily included taking his message to places beyond those deemed acceptable by his contemporary religious culture. Jesus meets a single and sinful

⁵² Stott, 246.

⁵³ Elowsky, ed., 147.

Samaritan woman in her self-imposed world of isolation, offering her a message of life that eventually spills over to her townspeople. By meeting this woman in her own place of comfort, Jesus uncomfortably calls out her sin, while offering her something better. And the wounded but transformed woman quickly becomes the evangelist. Our call in evangelism today is no different. Our world is full of people like this Samaritan woman, looking for more than the well can offer, but not sure where to find living water. As disciples of Jesus we must love them enough to go to them, not expect them to come find us. We must be the ones to intentionally cross our cultural or religious perceived barriers in order to live the incarnational way of Jesus. Only in so doing will we fully embody the One who was indeed sent to save the entire world.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Basic principles of evangelism, such as personal faith-sharing, cross-cultural communication, and critical contextualization are evident in Jesus, but are also witnessed throughout the course of Christian history. For my context in United Methodism a poignant example is found in early Methodist field preaching. What might an equivalent to field preaching look like in twenty-first century North American Methodism? That is a driving question behind my motivation for this project.

For this historical foundation chapter I will examine the development of field preaching as a mode of evangelism within early British and American Methodism. In examining this historic method I am not aimed at simply revitalizing the actual practice, but rather examining the motivation behind field preaching as well as the principles that one might glean from such a practice. By examining the undergirding principles I hope to provide a historical impetus for trying to discover a modern equivalent within current United Methodist congregations. I believe this will contribute to my overall project by illuminating core convictions for Methodism's founder, John Wesley, in the area of evangelism, as well as practical examples of how those convictions were fleshed out in the particular method of field preaching. While my assumption at this point is that in our current context the literal method of field preaching may not prove to be an effective

means of transmitting the gospel, I do believe the principles behind the original practice point to a significant need to reevaluate evangelism practices in modern Methodism.

The Historical Development of Field Preaching in Methodism

While it might be tempting to jump directly to the most celebrated figure in Methodism, John Wesley, the practice and use of preaching outside of typical church buildings obviously predates Mr. Wesley. There are very early examples one could point to from the New Testament and certainly with Jesus himself, but for the sake of this analysis I will begin with Howell Harris.

Harris was an eighteenth century Welsh revivalist who left behind almost 300 diaries, 3,000 letters and other miscellaneous papers. Harris is considered by some to be the first open air preacher in Methodism.¹ (Although itinerant field preaching had been underway in Wales even earlier with the work of Griffith Jones by the 1720s.)² Harris also would have a significant impact on the ministry of the more famous revivalist, George Whitefield. Whitefield and Harris both experienced spiritual conversions in 1735, but their ministries remained independent until 1739. In March of 1739 Whitefield traveled to Wales to witness the evangelical revival already unfolding there.³

¹ Richard W. Evans, “The Relations of George Whitefield and Howell Harris, Fathers of Calvinistic Methodism.” *Church History* 30, no. 2 (June 1961): 179.

² Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 97.

³ Keith Edward Beebe and David Ceri Jones, “Whitefield and the ‘Celtic’ Revivals,” in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, ed. Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 133.

In 1736 Harris had begun establishing small religious societies and by 1739 had established over thirty in south and south-east Wales. Wales was not in need of Whitefield to fan the flames of revival, those fires were already burning.⁴ But Whitefield's trip did forge an important bond with Howell Harris and inspired an evangelism method that would soon sweep across England. Writing of his connection with Harris, Whitefield described, "We joined hands and hearts and were so loving that I believe Satan envied us...we intend to make his kingdom shake." Just a few weeks before writing these words, Whitefield was inspired by Harris's example to preach in the open air for the first time.⁵ Whitefield and Harris formed an important partnership that would cement the branch of Calvinistic Methodism. At one point Harris even helped mediate differences between Whitefield and Wesley.⁶ Though Harris was first, it was Whitefield who had the most significant impact on Wesley.

George Whitefield had a flair for the dramatic and had been fascinated by theater from an early age. His academic record was not outstanding, but his religious zeal developed much more rapidly.⁷ As his life and ministry progressed Whitefield had such a passion for the ministry of proclamation that he made it known that he wished to die

⁴ Beebe and Jones, 133.

⁵ Beebe and Jones, 134.

⁶ Evans, 182-183.

⁷ Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones, "Introduction," in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, ed. Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

while preaching. (In fact he would come close to experiencing just that, dying at age fifty-five following a two-hour open air sermon at Newburyport, Massachusetts.)⁸

Whitefield preached his first sermon on June 27, 1736 and by the end of that year was getting letters from Wesley encouraging him to come and join him in ministry in Georgia.⁹ From August to December in 1737 Whitefield preached over one hundred times (averaging six to seven times per week) and became London's best known celebrity. At the end of that year he turned only twenty-three years old just two weeks before boarding a ship to head to Georgia at Wesley's request.¹⁰

Whitefield preached his first open air sermon after returning from work in the American colonies in 1738. Following the model of Howell Harris, on February 17, 1739 Whitefield stood on Kingswood hill on a Saturday afternoon and preached to a couple hundred coal miners.¹¹ This was precipitated by leaders of St Mary's church at Islington refusing to allow him to preach there after initially inviting him.¹² Similar to Wesley who would follow, Whitefield in some sense was really forced out of doors.

After that first experience of open air preaching Whitefield was filled with joy and sensed God compelling him forward. He recorded these words following that first event, "Blessed by God that I have now broken the ice! I believe I was never more

⁸ Hammond and Jones, 1.

⁹ Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*, A History of Evangelicalism, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 86.

¹⁰ Noll, 89.

¹¹ Hammond and Jones, 2.

¹² Braxton Boren, "Whitefield's Voice," in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, ed. Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 178.

acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to teach those hearers in the open fields.”¹³

John Gillies, who wrote the first biography of Whitefield, described the early development of this method for Whitefield in this way:

Opportunities of preaching in a more regular way being now denied him, and his preaching in the fields being attended with a remarkable blessing, he judged it his duty to go on in this practice, and ventured the following Sunday into Moorfields. Public notice having been given and the thing being new and singular, upon coming out of the coach, he found an incredible number of people assembled. Many had told him that he should never come again out of that place alive. He went in, however, between two of his friends; who by the pressure of the crowd, were soon parted entirely from him, and were obliged to leave him to the mercy of the rabble. But these, instead of hurting him, formed a lane for him, and carried him along to the middle of the fields, (where a table had been placed for, which was broken in pieces by the crowd,) and afterwards back again to the wall that then parted the upper and lower Moorfields; from whence he preached without molestation, to an extending great multitude in the lower fields.¹⁴

These early preaching occasions launched a new momentum in evangelistic field preaching in England. Whitefield began preaching regularly in this manner and consistently drew very large crowds. While estimates have been disputed and may indeed be unintentionally exaggerated by the methods used at the time to compute crowd size, it was originally reported that Whitefield drew 20,000 people at Bristol in 1740. Even detractors agreed these were the largest crowds they had seen.¹⁵

¹³ George Whitefield, February 17, 1739, *George Whitefield's Journals*, ed. Iain Murray (London, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 216.

¹⁴ Boren, 178.

¹⁵ Boren, 170.

Whitefield and other field preachers that would follow were certainly not without their critics. Many occasions for persecution were recorded. On one such occasion Whitefield was actually struck in the head by a stone from the crowd while preaching.¹⁶

When George Whitefield began field preaching in the late 1730s, he attracted crowds, converts, and controversy on an unprecedented scale as Methodism became a national, and even international, phenomenon. The antipathy Whitefield inspired in his critics occasionally manifested itself in physical violence, but it more regularly materialized in printed polemic and satirical literature; and Whitefield, along with John Wesley, became the movement's chief spokesman and apologist.¹⁷

But Whitefield did not cower in the face of opposition. If anything the push back meant that he reached a wider audience because of the curiosity it stirred in the public. In Whitefield's estimation, anti-Methodist hostility actually helped his cause.¹⁸

Having forged a friendship with John Wesley in the few years preceding, in 1739 Whitefield sent correspondence pleading with Wesley to come and help continue the work that had begun in Bristol. Wesley's initial reaction was very negative. He had much work to attend to in London. His brother Charles was also very much against the idea. Eventually the matter was settled by the drawing of a sacred lot within the Fetter Lane Society.¹⁹

¹⁶ William Gibson, "Whitefield and the Church of England," in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, ed. Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 56.

¹⁷ Brett C. McInelly, "Whitefield and His Critics," in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, edited by Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 150.

¹⁸ McInelly, 152.

¹⁹ William Parkes, "John Wesley: Field Preacher," *Methodist History* 30, no. 4 (July 1992): 218.

Wesley arrived in Bristol on Saturday, March 31. The next day he went to observe Whitefield preaching in the fields and what he saw startled him.²⁰

I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields...having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.²¹

Even with his reluctance, Wesley sensed God's hand at work and quickly gave in to this new method. After witnessing Whitefield preach from a little mount on Rose Green in Bristol to an estimated 30,000 people, the following day is when he wrote these famous few lines in own journal, "At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people."²²

In the coming days Wesley repeated this practice several times around Bristol with attendance ranging from 1,000-7,000 each time he preached.²³ While Wesley was the older and more seasoned in ministry, in the area of this evangelistic field preaching, Whitefield became the model.

Whitefield became the teacher of his spiritual adviser and father in Christ. Whitefield persuaded him to 'be more vile' and adopt 'this strange way of preaching in the fields'. Showing his respect for Wesley, Whitefield immediately handed the work over to him and headed out on a planned itinerant preaching tour...²⁴

²⁰ Parkes, 219.

²¹ John Wesley, March 31, 1739, Journals and Diaries II (1738-1743), vol. 19 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C Outler, Frank Baker, Richard P Heitzenrater, and Randy L Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

²² Wesley, April 2, 1739, Journal and Diaries II (1738-1743).

²³ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 99.

In May of 1739 Whitefield wrote in his journal, “But if this is to be vile, Lord grant that I may be more vile.”²⁵ In the act of field preaching “Wesley and Whitefield were brothers in bearing the reproach of the gospel.”²⁶

After the introduction from George Whitefield it did not take long for field preaching to become central to John Wesley’s ministry. From his journal Wesley records the attendance of his first month of field preaching at Bristol totalled 47,500, with an average of 3,000 per event. The following month brought even more. Almost exactly one year after his famed Aldersgate experience he preached to 10,000 at Rose Green. By the following month he took the practice back to London where he was preaching to even larger gatherings, sometimes over 15,000. (It should be noted, that as the notoriously better preacher, Whitefields crowds were even bigger. That July Whitefield preached to over 17,000 on one occasion at Rose Green.)²⁷

John’s brother, Charles, was highly skeptical of field preaching in general and also of the reported numbers. It was not until he stepped into the fields himself at Moorfields on June 24 and preached to over 10,000 that his attitude began to change. That initial experience removed his doubt and he recorded that he thought it was God’s will to do work in this way.²⁸

²⁴ Geordan Hammond, “Whitefield, John Wesley, and Revival Leadership,” in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, ed. Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 106.

²⁵ A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley, Evangelist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 108.

²⁶ Wood, 108.

²⁷ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 100.

²⁸ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 100.

Even though Methodism was still in its infancy as a movement (at this point most Methodist societies only had a few dozen people), the crowds for field preaching continued to grow. By September of 1739 John was preaching to crowds of 12-20,000 around London and Whitefield was reported to be drawing as many as 30,000.²⁹ John Wesley actually saw the start of his preaching at Bristol as the start of a “new life.”³⁰

Despite the difficulties between Wesley and Whitefield, by April 1739 with the employment of field preaching, all the major ingredients for a revival in Britain were in place: preachers marked by holiness and love; a message of forgiveness, liberation, and peace to proclaim; and a suitable audience. For Wesley, the first two elements were clearly in place by May 24, 1738; the last one not until April 2, 1739. However, all of these elements were necessary, none to the exclusion of the others, for promoting and sustaining the awakening that was soon to sweep across the land. Field preaching without Aldersgate, and its larger theological setting, would have been empty; Aldersgate without field preaching would have been pointless, even self-indulgent. Reluctantly, Wesley had found his calling, and grace would make his calling sure.³¹

Motives and Critics

After his first open air sermon Wesley preached for the next fifty-one years and six months until he offered his last message out of doors at the age of eighty-seven.³² Throughout his life, Wesley had a general practice of open air preaching, to a variety of audiences and whoever would listen, at least twice each day.³³ None of this meant that

²⁹ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 100.

³⁰ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 102.

³¹ Kenneth Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 104.

³² Parkes, 221.

³³ Scott Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist? Rediscovering Our Evangelistic Mission*, (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 77.

the practice ever came natural to him. In 1772 he was still referring to field preaching as a cross that he must bear.³⁴ By almost every account, the initial motivation for Wesley to employ field preaching was full of reluctance and forced upon him out of necessity.

It was unpredictable providence which led John Wesley to become an open-air evangelist. Field preaching was not congenial to him. Some men might have felt themselves to be in their element as they stood beneath the canopy of heaven. Not so Wesley. To him this seemed a strange way indeed. It was certainly not his own choice. He endured it only because God had called him to adopt such a means of approach to the people.³⁵

Wesley felt an undying compulsion to preach. So having been forced out of so many pulpits and running out of places to preach the gospel, Wesley felt compelled to follow his brother Whitefield in finding his own congregations outside of traditional buildings.³⁶ But after the circumstances pushed Wesley to the fields, his motivation seemingly became primarily related to the perceived effectiveness of this method for evangelism.

Being thus excluded from the churches and not daring to be silent, it remained only to preach in the open-air; which I did at first, not out of choice, but necessity; but I have since seen abundant reason to adore the wise providence of God herein, making a way for myriads of people who never troubled any church, nor were likely to do so, to hear that word which they soon found to be the power of God unto salvation.³⁷

Wesley discovered a method where the gospel could be delivered to people who otherwise may simply not hear the good news. “It brought him into contact with the

³⁴ Parkes, 231.

³⁵ Wood, 107.

³⁶ Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Principles and Practice of Preaching*, 91.

³⁷ John Wesley, “A Short History of a People Called Methodists,” of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C Outler, Frank Baker, Richard P Heitzenrater, and Randy L Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

labouring poor who would never have dared to go into a place of worship with their tatters and grime. If the bulk of the people were to hear the Christian message, this was the only method.”³⁸

Although it was regularly referred to as “field preaching” the practice did not always happen in a field. Any open air environment where a large crowd could be gathered would suffice.³⁹ Wesley even discovered that graveyards were an effective spot where he would use a gravestone as a pedestal and the church behind for a sort of amphitheater effect. Market crosses proved even better where Wesley could climb the steps in the town square and his voice could reverberate with the surrounding buildings.⁴⁰

Much of the early preaching was done in homes, barns, fields, and market-places, to large groups of “mixed” background spiritually. In fact, the crowds are often noted by John and Charles as rather raucous: “wild beasts” is one of Charles’s favorite descriptions. The point was, nevertheless, that these people, by and large, were not coming to the church. Therefore, as Christ sought us as a shepherd and came after us into the wilderness, so we should go to the people where they are. We have also been commanded to go into the highways and byways and invite the people to the gospel feast.⁴¹

The realities of field preaching were certainly not all glamor and comfort. It stirred significant criticism and even violence. “Outdoor preaching was not illegal in England, but it was irregular and was associated with the heretic Lollard ‘poor priests’ of the pre-Reformation time and some itinerant dissenters of later days.”⁴² Many local

³⁸ Wood, 110.

³⁹ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 99.

⁴⁰ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 100.

⁴¹ Heizenrater, *John Wesley’s Principles and Practice of Preaching*, 91.

⁴² Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 99.

clergy, feeling that field preachers were trespassing on their territory were adamantly against the practice.⁴³

Throughout his ministry Wesley would respond in various ways to the critics of his field preaching. It was in a letter responding to this issue where he used the famous phrase about seeing the world as his parish.⁴⁴ Eventually Wesley felt compelled to provide a more thorough written defense of field preaching and did so in his publication, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, published in 1745.⁴⁵

Wesley communicated both a sense of divine calling to the practice as well as a sincere motivation for the need apparent around him to reach the lost. Beyond all the issues of religious mores and the growing revival at hand, the fundamental push for Wesley to adopt field preaching seemed to have been primarily its effectiveness as an evangelism tool.

And one plain reason why, notwithstanding all these churches, they are no nearer being reclaimed, is this--they never come into a church, perhaps not once in a twelve-month, perhaps not for many years together. Will you say (as I have known some tender-hearted Chrsitians), ‘Then it is their fault; let them die, and be damned’? I grant it is their own fault; and so it was my fault and yours when we went astray like sheep that were lost. Yet the Shepherd of souls sought after us, and went after us in the wilderness. And ‘oughtest not thou to have compassion on thy fellow-servants, as he had pity on thee? Ought we not also ‘to seek,’ as far as in us lies, and to save that which is lost?’⁴⁶

⁴³ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 101.

⁴⁴ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 93.

⁴⁵ Wood, 112.

⁴⁶ John Wesley, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C Outler, Frank Baker, Richard P Heitzenrater, and Randy L Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

Here in “A Farther Appeal...” and in other places Wesley continually pointed people to the heart of God seeking the lost as a motivation for why we ought to do the same through field preaching.

Field Preaching in America

For the sake of the scope in this chapter I will not attempt to cover a large portion of the history of field preaching as it translated in the New World. I will, however, note here that it did have a significant place in the religious development in the early history of the United States.

As Methodism began to spread in America, most significantly at the hands of Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke following their appointment in 1784, preaching outdoors was a near necessity if the church were to reach people in the expanding frontier.

In fact, the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church helped enhance and facilitate the practice of this evangelism. In 1746 Wesley first organized the idea of circuits in Britain. To coordinate the widespread field preaching, he organized seven circuits based on geography. Groups of two or three preachers were assigned to a circuit for one month at a time and then moved to a different circuit the following month.⁴⁷

American Methodism adapted this concept of circuits and the practice of circuit riders became the norm. “On these circuits the preachers rode from one preaching site to the next to encourage faithfulness of those already organized into Methodist societies,

⁴⁷ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 162.

and to evangelize non-Methodists in the hopes either of drawing them into existing societies or of organizing them into new societies.”⁴⁸

Mark Teasdale suggests, “This organizational structure uniquely suited evangelism in several ways. First, it all but guaranteed that the circuit riders understood their primary job to be evangelistic. The denomination deployed them to proclaim the gospel and draw people into both the Christian faith and the Methodist Episcopal Church.”⁴⁹ He goes on to say very bluntly, “The Methodist preacher was an evangelist and a missionary precisely because he was a Methodist preacher.”⁵⁰

Another way that the structure of American Methodism reinforced a new kind of evangelical field preaching was the way it empowered the laity. This was true in England as well. Wesley’s system of discipleship automatically led to the multiplication of evangelists. “Converts were trained to become soul-winners themselves. Many enlisted as lay preachers--some itinerant and others local. Many more were appointed as leaders in their own society, and, in addition to watching over the flock, engaged in evangelistic activity in the neighbourhood.”⁵¹ But in particular in the United States, lay people were required to get involved because of the relative infrequency of circuit-riding preachers.

The point is that all this took place *before* the formation of official missionary societies. Methodism had a mobile laity before it had missionaries, it had missionaries before it had a missionary society, and it had locally based missionary societies before it had a national missionary society.⁵²

⁴⁸ Mark R. Teasdale, “Evangelism and Identity in Early American Methodism.” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 91.

⁴⁹ Teasdale, 91.

⁵⁰ Teasdale, 92.

⁵¹ Wood, 225

The evangelical fervor expected of preachers in America can be seen clearly in the 1798 Discipline and the leadership of Asbury and Coke. Under section VIII, which laid out the expectations of preachers, they quote Wesley and wrote:

You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always not only to those that want, but to those that want you most. Observe! It is not your business only to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society: But to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness, without which they cannot see the Lord.⁵³

In practice, one of the primary and most effective methods to involve field preaching in the United States was the emergence of camp meetings. Starting originally in Scotland, camp meetings burst onto the scene in America with the Cane Ridge revival in 1801 in Kentucky. The spirit and dynamics of camp meetings connected well with frontier Americans. Many would come to conversion at these meetings and supernatural phenomenon were regularly reported. Camp meetings continued on much of the power and experience in America what had begun with field preaching in England.⁵⁴

Field Preaching and Discipleship

Both in America and back in England, field preaching was never intended to be a practice that stood in isolation from the rest of Methodism's commitments. Field preaching was a way to introduce people to the gospel, but never the end itself. Wesley and the Methodists that followed in his way were always looking to form societies,

⁵² David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 30.

⁵³ Teasdale, 97.

⁵⁴ Teasdale, 94-96.

convinced that ongoing accountable community and discipleship was fundamental to seeing people grow in holiness. It was in concert with societies, class meetings and band meetings that field preaching provided such fruit.

There was, however, a period starting in 1745 where Wesley experimented with this proven formula. He began to think that field preaching was far more important than forming societies and decided to concentrate on preaching without society formation. But by 1748, after two or three years of this shifted focus Wesley called the experiment off.⁵⁵ Wesley noted in the Minutes that year, “Almost all the seed has fallen by the wayside; there is scarce any fruit of it remaining.”⁵⁶

Fifteen years later his assessment of this sort of preaching without intentional formation to follow was even more stark:

I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murder. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.⁵⁷

George Whitefield realized this pitfall as well and later in life noted the difference between his and Wesley’s ministry. “My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that

⁵⁵ Heizenrater, *John Wesley’s Principles and Practice of Preaching*, 93.

⁵⁶ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 165.

⁵⁷ John Wesley, August 25, 1763, Journals and Diaries IV (1755-1765), vol. 21 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C Outler, Frank Baker, Richard P Heitzner, and Randy L Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruit of his labour. This I neglected and my people are a rope of sand.”⁵⁸

This connection between evangelism and discipleship was absolutely key for early Methodism. John Wesley was intent on seeing people grow in holiness. Field preaching particularly, and evangelism in general, was not a means to mere expanded numbers, rather it was simply the front door to his goal of full-time Christian discipleship.

The goal of the church is not mere growth. The goal of the church is producing actual Christians serving and worshipping the triune God. Numerical growth is only a byproduct, not an aim. The connection between field preaching and discipleship (like class meetings) in early Methodism is an example of this important distinction. And it speaks to the reason my metrics in this project are about the discipleship practice of faith-sharing rather than simple conversion numbers.

The Waning Field Preaching and the Decline of Methodism

Much has been written about the rapid growth of Methodism both in the United States and in England. In most of that analysis it is hard to pinpoint any single cause for the movement’s meteoric rise and subsequent decline, but it seems as though the use of field preaching is at minimum tangentially related.

John Wesley never waned in his own commitment to the practice of open air preaching. In 1756 Wesley wrote, “It is field preaching which does the execution

⁵⁸ Heizenrater, *John Wesley's Principles and Practice of Preaching*, 94.

still...for usefulness there is none comparable to it.”⁵⁹ In 1759 after the occasion of a preaching event at Cumberland he made this strong statement, “many were there who never did and never would come to a room. Oh what victory would Satan gain if he could put an end to field preaching! But that, I trust, he never will; at least not till my head is laid.”⁶⁰ Even much later in August of 1773 he still clearly has the zeal. After seeing the largest crowd to date at Moorfields, he wrote, “So the season for field preaching is not yet over. It cannot, while so many are in their sins and in their blood.”⁶¹

With his own convictions about the need of field preaching Wesley was very concerned to find places where it had stopped. Toward the end of his ministry he noted this about preaching at Stroud and finding they had stopped their habit of early morning outdoors preaching:

In the evening I preached at Stroud; where to my surprise, I found the morning preaching was given up, as also in the neighbouring places. If this be the case while I am alive, what must it be when I am gone? Give up this, and Methodism too will degenerate into a mere sect, only distinguished by some opinions and modes of worship.⁶²

In a letter to James Rea in 1766 Wesley shared a similar sentiment. “It is the cooping yourselves up in rooms that has damped the work of God, which was and never

⁵⁹ John Wesley, October 10, 1756, Journals and Diaries IV (1755-1765), vol. 21 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C Outler, Frank Baker, Richard P Heitzenrater, and Randy L Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

⁶⁰ Wesley, May 20, 1759, Journals and Diaries IV.

⁶¹ John Wesley, July 25, 1773, Journals and Diaries V (1765-1775), vol. 22 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C Outler, Frank Baker, Richard P Heitzenrater, and Randy L Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

⁶² John Wesley, March 15, 1784, Journals and Diaries VI (1776-1786), vol. 23 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C Outler, Frank Baker, Richard P Heitzenrater, and Randy L Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

will be carried out to any purpose without going into the highways and hedges and compelling poor sinners to come in.”⁶³

In *The Churhching of America*, sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Starke take a fresh look at the way the religious landscape developed in the United States. While they do not address field preaching in particular, they do insist that an assessment of decline highlights the formalization of education and societal conformity as significant factors in the downfall of Methodism in America. They insist Methodism’s pursuit of cultural respectability was a major factor in decline.⁶⁴ In the early days almost all Methodist preachers were uneducated and the Methodist movement did not focus on forming colleges while other more respected denominations focused heavily on higher education.⁶⁵

Methodism experienced incredible growth from 1776 to 1850 as they rose from less than 3% of the nation’s church members to more than 34% in a matter of decades. But almost as fast as they grew, the rate of growth started to decline. By 1890 they were already overtaken in church membership by Roman Catholics.⁶⁶

The same underlying processes that transformed the Puritan sect into the Congregational Church subsequently transformed the upstart Methodist into the Methodist Episcopal Church. When successful sects are transformed into churches, that is, when their tension with the surrounding culture is greatly reduced, they soon cease to grow and eventually begin to decline.⁶⁷

⁶³ Kisker, 78.

⁶⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churhching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 145-169.

⁶⁵ Finke and Stark, 76.

⁶⁶ Finke and Stark, 145.

⁶⁷ Fink and Stark, 148.

It is, in my estimation, this exact kind of cultural pressure that tends to create tension with a practice like field preaching, which was almost always viewed by religious and cultural elites as undignified. Less than 20 years after the Large Minutes of 1789, where field preaching was still implored, the practice had so diminished in some of the Methodist connection that open air preaching by a considerable number of North Staffordshire Methodists led to their being read out of the societies. They went on to form the Primitive Methodists.⁶⁸

Principles and Conclusions

I have demonstrated the essential role that field preaching played in early Methodism, both through contemporary commentary as well as through Whitefield and Wesley's own words. By highlighting the development historically and the nature of how it functioned in the overall Methodist schema, I showed the primary evangelistic motivation attached to the practice. It was fueled by the unwavering commitment that this act of leaving the traditional church setting would help reach souls otherwise not reached.

Even early on in the development of this practice, at the 1746 Conference, preachers were already being urged to refocus on field preaching. “Have we not limited field preaching too much? ...We cannot expect wanderers from God to seek us. It is our part to go and seek them.”⁶⁹ Drawing on the motivation and practice of early field

⁶⁸ Parkes, 223.

⁶⁹ Heizenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 161.

preaching there are several principles that emerge which might prove to have significant impact upon our practices of evangelism in today's Methodist church.

First, evangelism in this model must include the opportunity for people to hear the gospel without coming to a typical religious setting. Part of Wesley's insistence was that people heard his sermons in open air that never would inside a church. Second, the burden to cross cultural barriers or bear discomfort in delivering the message is upon the preacher or Christian, not the hearer. Wesley and others took the burden of criticism, both from the world and the church, and even the potential of physical harm upon themselves to undertake this practice. Their evangelistic fervor trumped their need to stay comfortable and safe inside a church. If we want to follow in this same model we must be willing to accept that burden as well. Field preaching was in many respects, undignified. Third, evangelism following in the principles of field preaching will not rely on attractional gimmicks or always give people what they want to hear. These early Methodists evangelists dealt in the reality of sin while offering the hope of salvation. They did not assume their message would attract people to church, therefore they felt the necessary step to go to their audience.

But with all this, it still remains the fact that by far the majority of Wesley's mission sermons were preached elsewhere than in a building designed for worship. His real pulpit was where the people were. His evangelism was not of the passive sort (if that is worthy of the name), which waits for unbelievers to come to church. His was essentially an outgoing ministry to take the gospel, as the Saviour did, to the man and woman in the street.⁷⁰

The call on Christians is still the same today. Given the change in typical work environments, communication mediums, and cultural norms of the 21st century, I am not

⁷⁰ Wood, 152.

suggesting Christians literally stand in fields and preach. I am suggesting that the same principles that underscored the Wesleyan commitment to the practice ought to underscore our evangelism attempts today. Dr. Scott Kisker writes, “In our generation, we must find the equivalent of the Market Cross if we are to regain our evangelistic vitality. Where and how do we submit ourselves to be more vile to reach those who will not cross the thresholds of our churches?”⁷¹

Donald Soper says it well: “The Methodist Revival could not have happened without the ingredient of field preaching as a vital constituent. The moral and spiritual revival which is the hope, indeed the requirement, of man’s future on this planet requires similar evangelical excursion into the open air today.”⁷²

⁷¹ Kisker, 78.

⁷² Donald Soper, “Wesley the Outdoor Preacher,” in *John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. John Stacey (Westminster, London: Epworth Press, 1988), 189.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Turning now to the theological underpinnings of this project, it is important that the practice of personal evangelism is situated in the larger theological context of the church’s “sentness,” or missioning. The very idea of attempting to deliver the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others must be rooted in the church’s overall nature and mission. I argue that understanding the nature of the church in light of God’s mission in the world will underscore the need to be very intentional in the church’s teaching and practice of evangelism. In order to frame this conversation I turn to one of the most influential voices of the 20th century in this particular understanding of ecclesiology, Leslie Newbigin. Through Newbigin’s own writing, as well as the analysis of his thought by others, I show that the nature of the church is inseparable of the church’s mission in the world. I also highlight practical ways that Newbigin’s missional ecclesiology impacts the way one thinks about outreach and evangelism today.

Background on Leslie Newbigin

Leslie Newbigin was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England in 1909. He was educated at the University of Cambridge and came to faith in Christ while there. In 1936 Newbigin was ordained in the Church of Scotland and sent as a missionary to India. It was out of decades of hands-on missionary work that much of his writing and

theologizing developed. While Newbigin was in India the country became independent of Britain. Shortly after the Church of South India was formed from an organic union of Congregational, Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations. That year, at the age of 37, Newbigin was elected one of the new church's first bishops.

Newbigin became an international figure who was involved significantly in the ecumenical movement. He would go on to play a key role in the World Council of Churches. This ecumenical work factored significantly into his passion for the unity of the Church.

After retiring from his active role in India in 1974 he served as a professor of missiology and ecumenism for five years at the Selly Oak College in Birmingham. It was in this time frame that he brought together much of his missiological thought in *The Open Secret* which will be referenced heavily in this paper. Newbigin then became the pastor of a small congregation from 1980-1988 while he continued his writing. After some additional years of traveling and speaking Newbigin died in 1998.¹

Newbigin is best known for and did most his writing on a few primary theological themes. These included the eschatological nature of the church, the missionary nature of the church, the relationship between the church's unity and mission, and the post-Christendom nature of Christianity in the West, including how it ought to be viewed as a mission field and reconverted.² It is these consistent themes in Newbigin's writing and influence that drew me to his content and from which I believe I can draw important

¹ Christopher B. James, "Newbigin, J(ames) E(dward) Lesslie (1909-1998): British missionary bishop in India, theologian, and ecumenical statesman," Boston University School of Theology, accessed November 25, 2019, <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/n-o-p-q/newbigin-james-edward-lesslie-1909-1998>.

² James.

foundations for a project focused on the role of evangelism in a secularized North American context.

The Starting Place for a Missional Ecclesiology

“There is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world.”³ The principal place of mission for what it means to be the Church, or even more fundamentally, what it means to be Christian, is the thread that runs throughout Newbigin’s work. In nearly all of his major works, however, Newbigin never simply launches into a discussion of mission without first looking at what he deems to be even more basic. Newbigin always wants to start with the Gospel, who is Jesus and what has God done through him. He tends to begin with what he believes is the overarching story of Scripture.

One of Newbigin’s most firm commitments is that God’s story in Christ is not a private story, but if true, is the truth for all the world. Therefore it is a public truth. The early confession of the church, “Jesus is Lord,” is one that immediately thrusts our claim into the public sphere.⁴

Michael Goheen has written extensively on Newbigin and characterizes his primary themes as a fourfold dynamic that drives his thought: gospel, story, missional people, and missionary encounter with culture. Regarding Newbigin’s starting place for a missional ecclesiology, Goheen writes, “...if we start with the gospel, we find ourselves in the middle of the Bible as one story whose central thread is the missional vocation of

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 1.

⁴ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 16.

God's people, a people who necessarily live out their calling in a missionary encounter with culture.”⁵ According to Newbigin the Bible is universal history.⁶ And the story of the Bible hinges on Jesus. “Anyone who would consider Newbigin’s understanding of any issue, including ecclesiology, must begin with Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the gospel.”⁷ That is why any notion of the church and how it relates to the world must start with Christ. Interestingly, though, this Christocentric beginning propels Newbigin into a heavily Trinitarian framework. In answering the question, “Who is Jesus?” his thought progresses towards the Trinity.

Here, then, is the first answer to the question ‘Who is Jesus?’ He is the Son, sent by the Father and anointed by the Spirit to be the bearer of God’s kingdom to the nations. This is the Jesus who was proclaimed by the first Christians to the world of their time.⁸

From Gospel to Ecclesiology

Newbigin builds his missional ecclesiology as follows. First, any missionary proclaiming any message is met with the question, “By what authority do you speak?” To that question one must answer, like the disciples, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Then one is faced with the question, “Who is this Jesus?” And the answer to that question draws one into the grand narrative of the Bible, which if true, is not true just for the missionary or a

⁵ Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 9.

⁶ Goheen, 23.

⁷ Goheen, 15.

⁸ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 24.

particular individual, but rather, based on its own claims, is a story of cosmic truth for all people, in all places, and in all times.

The church, then, is inextricably linked to God's plan to reveal this story of ultimate redemption that is already at play in the world which is willed by Father, consummated in the Son, and carried out until completion through the Holy Spirit by way of the Church. Goheen eloquently summarizes the connection:

The church is rooted in the gospel. The good news is that in Christ and by the Spirit God has revealed and accomplished the cosmic renewal that lies at the end of history. The end of history has been held off so that his good news might reach all people and all nations to the very ends of the earth. In this time between times, the Spirit gives this new eschatological life to the church to enable it to be a preview of the kingdom in the midst of all nations in its own life and to point to it in its words and deeds. Since the gospel is a gospel of the kingdom, the whole life of God's people bears witness to the reality that Jesus Christ is the Lord to the glory of the Father. This is not simply one more task given to the church; it defines its very existence as missionary.⁹

So Goheen summarizes Newbigin's understanding of the nature of the church.

It is this movement from Jesus to the fundamental story of the gospel which Newbigin sees as the grand narrative of Scripture. And that narrative propels him to view mission as fundamentally Trinitarian. In what is his most succinct overview of this progression Newbigin outlines his missional view of the church in Trinitarian terms in his later work *The Open Secret*. In this work he breaks his understanding of the missional nature of the church into three primary categories: proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, sharing the life of the Son, and bearing the witness of the Spirit.¹⁰

⁹ Goheen, 65.

¹⁰ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 29.

Proclaiming the Kingdom of the Father

When Newbigin begins to discuss mission with the gospel, he often begins with Jesus proclamation of the kingdom in Mark 1:14-15. Newbigin is very focused on the reign of God, but to understand the concept of God's reign and present kingdom he moves very quickly back into salvation history. Taking a cue from the opening of John's gospel, Newbigin goes back to creation and the story of God's unfolding plan to be in relationship with humanity. "The first announcement of the good news that the reign of God is at hand can be understood only in the context of this biblical sketch of a universal history. The reign of God is his reign over all things."¹¹

Newbigin's interest in the beginning of God's plan as recorded in Genesis leads him to continually highlight what may seem a peculiar theme for a missiologist: election. He spends considerable time unpacking the idea of election, especially as it relates to Israel. His writing around election is not, however, characterized by heavy-handed determinism, but serves as a lens through which one can see the sovereign and intentional plan of God. Newbigin continually connects the reason for God's election to God's desire and sovereign design to redeem all of creation. "Those who are chosen to be bearers of a blessing are chosen for the sake of *all*." "Bearers [are] not exclusive beneficiaries."¹²

The Bible, then, is covered with God's purposes of blessing for all the nations. It is concerned with the completion of God's purpose in the creation of the world and of man within the world. It is not—to put it crudely—concerned with offering

¹¹ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 31.

¹² Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 32.

a way to escape for the redeemed soul out of history, but with the action of God to bring history to its true end.¹³

This idea of Israel as a few chosen for the sake of many leads Newbigin to view the Church through that same lens today. Here is where his connection between election and mission is made. The Church, seen as those chosen by a sovereign God, are set apart not for their own sake, that is, not to escape the perils of this life or the eternal wrath that would come, but rather to be bearers of God's in-breaking kingdom for the salvation of all. Through election, like that of Noah, and of Abraham, God chooses a few to work out his plan for the many. "Thus, to be elect in Christ means to be incorporated into his mission to the world and to bear God's reconciling purpose for the whole world."¹⁴

To summarize, Newbigin starts his Trinitarian framework for the missional church by looking at God's intent throughout human history to redeem that which was lost, first through the election of Israel and subsequently the church. In understanding this activity of God in history we see the church as that which is continuing the proclamation of the kingdom of God, his true reign, intended from the beginning, revealed through Israel, and inaugurated in Jesus Christ.

Mission, seen from this angle, is faith in action. It is the acting out by proclamation and by endurance, through all the events of history, of the faith that the kingdom of God has drawn near. It is the acting out of the central prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to use: "Father, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as in heaven."¹⁵

Sharing the Life of the Son

¹³ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 33-34.

¹⁴ Goheen, 31.

¹⁵ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 39.

In describing the sovereign will of the Father, Newbigin concentrates on the cosmic nature of God's plan for redemption and new creation. In the first part of the missional identity of the church the focus is quite vast in scope. As he moves into the second part of his Trinitarian framework, Newbigin gets more concrete by emphasizing the tangible ministry of Jesus. Addressing this closeness to creation found in Jesus, Newbigin states,

It was that the kingdom, or kingship, of God was no longer a distant hope or a faceless concept. It had now a name and a face—the name and face of the man from Nazareth. In the New Testament we are dealing not just with proclamation of the kingdom but also with the presence of the kingdom.¹⁶

Within this second part of Newbigin's framework he focuses on the embodied nature of the church as the continued tangible presence of Christ. Within this emphasis there are two practical themes that run throughout Newbigin's work. First, Newbigin insists that we cannot sever proclamation and demonstration, or word and deed. Second, Newbigin demonstrates a passion for the role of relational community within the missional life of a church.

Newbigin's leadership and writing was situated squarely within the height of the ecumenical movement. This being the case, one of the themes of Newbigin's writing was trying to draw together what has been seen as the strengths of both the evangelical world (namely evangelism based on proclamation) and the ecumenical world (namely an emphasis on works of justice and peace). Newbigin was convinced that understanding Jesus' proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom necessitated an ongoing view of the church which required both. Newbigin took care, however, to situate this view in light

¹⁶ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 40.

of his understanding of the biblical narrative and salvation.¹⁷ To clarify his vision of the church's role in mercy and justice ministries, Newbigin introduced an image of the church that he returns to often, that of the “servant community.”¹⁸

Newbigin did not believe that the church could build the kingdom of God through politics or other deeds aimed at justice. But he did believe that the tangible action of the church was essential to the nature of salvation, characterized her witness, demonstrated real love and compassion, helped bring people to conversion, and had a transforming effect on culture.¹⁹ Having this view you find subtle and not-so-subtle sections throughout his work aimed at illuminating the need for works of mercy, justice and peace for an evangelical readership. For Newbigin this aspect of the church's missional life was directly linked to the ongoing witness of the kind of work that Jesus embodied while on earth. The church is a servant community.

Alternatively, Newbigin was utterly committed to the verbal proclamation of the gospel and railed against any idea that the church could only do works of service and neglect the preaching of the gospel. As Goheen puts it, “Silence is nothing other than a betrayal of the Gospel!” He then quotes Newbigin, insisting that if our presence and deeds become “a substitute for the explicit proclamation of the name of Jesus and his saving work, then we have to reject it as a betrayal of the gospel. There can be no substitute for the name of Jesus. Men must have opportunity to know him.”²⁰

¹⁷ Goheen, 88.

¹⁸ Goheen, 91.

¹⁹ Goheen, 88-90.

²⁰ Goheen, 94.

In addition to this passionate insistence on the connection between word and deed, Newbigin also sees the missional nature of the church, in relation to sharing the life of the Son, as necessarily communal. The role of the community in bearing witness to the world was essential for Newbigin. Here again we find Goheen's analysis helpful.

"Evangelism would lose its power apart from 'the life of a new kind of community [where] the saving power of the Gospel is known and tasted.'"²¹ Newbigin saw the communal life of the Church as a foretaste of the coming kingdom. He insisted that our witness to the reality of a Trinitarian God could not be complete apart from the experience of authentic community.

Summarizing the way in which all of these tangible components of church life come together, Newbigin argued:

If we say—as we must—that the reign of God was present in Jesus, that it was present in his living, his dying, and his risen life, we have to go on to say that in a secondary, derivative, but nonetheless real sense the reign of God is present (hidden yet revealed to eyes of faith) in the community that bears his name, lives by faith in his person and work, is anointed by his Spirit, and lives through history the dying and rising of Jesus. It is a sinful community. It is, during most its history, a weak, divided, and unsuccessful community. But because it is the community that lives by and bears witness to the risen life of the crucified Lord, it is the place where the reign of God is actually present and at work in the midst of history, and where the mission of Jesus is being accomplished.

Bearing the Witness of the Spirit

To round out this his Trinitarian framework Newbigin turns his focus to the Holy Spirit in order to understand the church's mission. He summarizes his discussion of the Father with the word proclamation, that of the Son as presence, and the work of the Spirit

²¹ Goheen, 95.

as prevenience.²² By prevenience Newbigin hopes to use the this final part of the Trinitarian framework to emphasize the way in which the mission is not possessed by or even ultimately dependent upon the church.

I have affirmed that God's kingship is present in the church; but it must be insisted that it is not the property of the church. It is not domesticated within the church. Mission is not simply the self-propagation of the church by putting forth of the power that inheres in its life...Mission is not just something the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church in its missionary journey.²³

With this emphasis on the Spirit Newbigin emphasizes the sovereignty of God in the church's mission and deemphasizes particular methods or programs. Newbigin sees the Spirit as the one who ultimately accomplishes the mission of God and often in ways that seem contrary to church strategy or human wisdom. For Newbigin, the church's witness is "secondary and derivative."²⁴

Newbigin cites as evidence the ways in which the church has grown and triumphed in times and places of great peril and when the church was not strong in a worldly sense. Through seemingly insignificant people and in very difficult places the church has grown and expanded. Newbigin sees this as evidence of the Spirit's control over the life of the church.

If our 'evangelism' is at bottom an effort to shore up the tottering edifice of the Church (and it sometimes looks like that), then it will not be heard as good news. The Church is in God's keeping. We do not have the right to be anxious about it. We have our Lord's word that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The crux of the matter is that we have been chosen to be the bearers of good news for

²² Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 56.

²³ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 56.

²⁴ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 61.

the whole world, and the question is simply whether we are faithful in communicating it.²⁵

The mission of God defines the church but is not owned by the church. And the church is not responsible for its final success.

Overall, it is in this Trinitarian way of understanding the church's mission that Newbigin situates the identity of the church in the overarching salvation plan of God revealed through scripture. The church proclaims the reign of God over all things, as the Father is king of all. It embodies the presence of the kingdom, sharing in the mysteries of Christ, in order to tangibly demonstrate the love of Jesus made known on the cross. And the church obediently follows the lead of the Spirit, many times in ways not fully understood, that the church may serve as the hope and foretaste of God's final promise.²⁶

The church is inherently a sent body. Newbigin loves to draw his readers back to the commissioning of the disciples in John 20.²⁷ As the Son is sent into the world by the Father, and the Son sends the disciples into the world, so also the church is sent into the world. "The Church is a movement launched into the world in the same way Jesus is sent into the world by the Father."²⁸

Forty times in this Gospel Jesus is described as the one sent by the Father; now he sends them to continue and complete his mission. This mission wholly defines the nature of the Church as a body of men and women sent into the public life of the

²⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, "The Pastor's Opportunities: Evangelism in the City," in *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions*, ed. Eleanor Jackson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 41.

²⁶ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 64-65.

²⁷ Newbigin seems to have a deep affinity for John's gospel in general.

²⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, "Does Society Still Need the Parish Church," in *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions*, ed. Eleanor Jackson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 55.

world to be the bearer of that peace which Christ has wrought “by the blood of his cross.” They will participate in his mission as they participate in his passion.²⁹

Practical Implications

Practical implications for ministry, such as evangelism practices, flow rather naturally from Newbigin’s ecclesiology. This is no surprise. As a lifelong missionary engaged in street ministry and the like, he is a thinker who consistently moves his thoughtful reflection toward practice. Newbigin brings to bear his view of the missional church on contemporary issues of his time such as ecumenism, the church growth movement, cultural engagement, evangelism, etc.

In particular Newbigin offers much criticism of the church growth movement that began with Dr. Donald McGavran out of Fuller Theological Seminary, which has played an important role in the shaping of North American Christianity in the second half of the 20th century. While acknowledging noble intentions, Newbigin insists that numerical growth is not the point of mission. Pointing to the Apostle Paul he suggests that the New Testament church, while celebrating numerical growth, never seemed to make it the goal. He states, “In no sense does the triumph of God’s reign seem to depend upon the growth of the church.”³⁰ He also offers a forceful critique: “When numerical growth is taken as the criterion of judgment on the church, we are transported with alarming ease into the world of the military campaign or the commercial sales drive.”³¹ Much of his criticism

²⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 268.

³⁰ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 125.

³¹ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 126.

flows from his view of the Holy Spirit being the ultimate actor in the church's mission. Our job is to faithfully embody and proclaim, to live as faithful missionaries, as ones sent by God. God's job is to worry about the growth of the church.

In addition to trying to correct the church's self-understanding and practice in light of these sort of schools of thought, Newbigin also offered positive instruction on how the church can flesh out the vision of mission he puts forth. Goheen summarizes some of the distinctive ways Newbigin sees the church is called to be a witness.³²

First, Newbigin suggests that our witness comes through the distinctive life of the community. The reality of God's in-breaking kingdom leads to the formation of a kind of other-worldly community that bears witness to God's promise of new creation. A community can point the world to the truth simply by the way it functions together and the kind of worship practices that it undertakes.³³

Second, Newbigin highlights the important role of the vocation of believers in culture. One of the primary places that Newbigin sees an opportunity for witness, and therefore occupies much space in his writing, is the way that believers live out their faith in their particular vocations. Newbigin sees this as a ripe mission field that creates a natural interface between the church and the world.³⁴

³² Goheen, 78.

³³ Goheen, 79-82.

³⁴ Goheen, 82-86.

A third area of witness that finds a consistent theme in Newbigin's writings are the importance of deeds of justice, peace and mercy.³⁵ Having referenced this already I will not discuss it further here.

Finally, a major area of the church's witness discussed by Newbigin is the area of evangelism. This is of particular interest to me given its obvious connection to this project. "For Newbigin, evangelism is 'communication—by written or spoken word—of the good news about Jesus. In this definition there will be no evangelism unless the name of Jesus is named.'"³⁶ As I mentioned early in my discussion of word and deed, Newbigin was insistent on the combination of both proclamation and demonstration. As forceful as he was in his correction of the evangelical camp regarding works of justice and mercy, he was equally cogent towards the ecumenical camp regarding the necessity of evangelism.

Speaking more broadly of what Newbigin views as one of the ills of the ecumenical movement, he writes,

It is impossible to reconcile with the New Testament the view which seems to be more or less accepted among the majority of Churchmen, that while missionary work is an admirable thing to do, within reasonable limits, it is not something without which the Church simply falls to the ground. We must say bluntly that when the Church ceases to be a mission, then she ceases to have any right to the titles by which she is adorned in the New Testament.³⁷

One further area where Newbigin places much attention is the way in which we ought to approach evangelism in a secularized society. Newbigin was heavily influential in the church beginning to rediscover the West as a mission field. He consistently

³⁵ Goheen, 86

³⁶ Goheen, 93.

³⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*, (New York, NY: Friendship Press, 1954), 163.

discussing ways to re-evangelize Europe, for example. For this reason his content is timely for ministry in the United States where we have followed much of the same pattern in religious history. Newbigin says the Western church has “totally failed to recognize that the most urgent contemporary mission field is to be found in their own traditional heartlands, and that the most aggressive paganism with which they have to engage is the ideology that now controls the developed world.”³⁸

In his article “Evangelism in the Context of Secularization,” Newbigin writes about how churches are having fewer people identify with them and evangelism often then becomes an effort by the churches to avoid collapse and recruit more people to their cause.³⁹ But rather than situate evangelism as something that would prop up the church, Newbigin has much grander motivations in mind. He sees the act as a necessary continuation of the grand narrative revealed in scripture and announced by Jesus.

Turning to the Apostle Paul he notes that Paul is actually silent on the command to go and evangelize. And yet that is coupled with the reality that he seems to implicitly suggest that one cannot know the truth of the gospel and keep quiet about it. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 9:16. Paul instructs the Corinthians on so many other fronts but never lays on them the duty to go out and evangelize. Why? Newbigin turns to the true announcement of what happened in Jesus and suggests that if the resurrection is true, and a new creation has begun, “one does not have to be summoned to the ‘task’ of evangelism. If these things are really true, they have to be told.”⁴⁰ How will this truth of

³⁸ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 10.

³⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, “Evangelism in the Context of Secularization,” in *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions*, ed. Eleanor Jackson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 151.

⁴⁰ Newbigin, “Evangelism in the Context of Secularization,” 151.

the world be shared? Newbigin suggests a threefold answer: “by a certain kind of shared life, by actions, and by words that interpret those actions.”⁴¹ Newbigin sees the overflow of the life in the New Testament church as evidence that evangelism is not just one task the church must undertake, but is essential in understanding its identity.

Much more could be said of Newbigin’s work. On the whole it should be clear why Newbigin was a champion of mission for the church and his influence continues among many. To understand Newbigin is to understand that mission is not one task the church does. It is not even a responsibility of the church. It is the nature of what it means to be the church. In his early foundational work, *The Household of God*, Newbigin writes, “...the Church’s existence is in the act of being the bearer of that salvation to the whole world.” He then quotes Emil Brunner in saying, “The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” Newbigin continues, “It has its being, so to say, in the magnetic field between Christ and the world. Its koinonia in Him is a participation in His apostolate to the world.”⁴²

The bottom line for Newbigin is that “the Church exists to embody and to tell the story which is the true story.”⁴³ Because the church is sent and formed for this role, it is by nature a missionary church. If this is the true nature of the Church, one that cannot be understood apart from her mission from God for the world, then the practical outworking of such a vision necessitates concrete steps to instruct local believers in this understanding and lead them into faithful practices which undergird this concept of

⁴¹ Newbigin, “Evangelism in the Context of Secularization,” 152.

⁴² Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 163.

⁴³ Goheen, 163.

witness. It is to that end that this project takes its aim. The training to be offered is an attempt, albeit in a limited way, to lead everyday Christians into a greater sense of the gravity of their calling as the Church. And then to couple that understanding with tangible practices to help them begin intentionally proclaiming the truth, which Newbigin calls public truth, the good news of God's redemption for all of creation.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

In this final chapter I shift my attention from the principles that undergird the content of this project to theoretical understandings that inform the design of its actual implementation. As I argued in chapter one, evangelism in personal practice has waned in modern United Methodist congregations. In order to introduce this training in a way that leads to lasting transformation, thereby revitalizing evangelism, will require an understanding of how adults learn.

It is difficult to lead toward any shift in a person's well engrained habits. But the ability to invoke change gets particularly challenging when one is trying to adjust behavior in an area that goes against the grain of social norms and creates significant personal fear. This is the case in my experience with the topic of personal evangelism practices. Most United Methodists congregants I meet experience real personal anxiety when discussing the idea of becoming more intentional about publicly sharing their faith in Jesus Christ.

In this chapter I will examine a field of research that has just developed in the last 50-100 years: adult education theory. I will highlight two respected theories, andragogy and transformative learning theory, which both contain similar theoretical underpinnings. By examining these two theories I will demonstrate how an understanding of adult

education theory can help craft learning strategies that will shape the evangelism training I will implement for this project.

Malcolm Knowles is a thought leader in the area of adult education theory, writing significant works in the 1960s and 1970s. Growth in the field of adult education theory started after World War I, but until that time almost all literature assumed there was only one theoretical framework for education, pedagogy, which even has its etymology connecting it specifically to children. In the 1940s and 1950s writers started pulling together key concepts and learnings in adult education. One such scholar, J. R. Kidd, writing in the 1950s, made the observation that dramatically more attention has been given to the topic of teaching than that of learning. Kidd asserts that learning is an active activity deserving increased study, especially related to how adults learn.¹ Kidd made early practical contributions by linking learning to change. For Kidd, “learning means change.”²

Knowles suggests that by the 1940s most of the elements required for a comprehensive theory of adult learning had been discovered, but they had not yet been brought together in a unified theory.³ It was his work in the 1960s, then, that made great strides in the field by introducing a more comprehensive adult learning theory that he

¹ J. R. Kidd, *How Adults Learn*, New York, NY: Association Press, 1959, 15.

² Kidd, 17.

³ Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, 2d ed, Building Blocks of Human Potential Series. Houston, TX: Gulf Pub. Co., Book Division, 1978, 37.

coined “andragogy.”⁴ On the whole, like Kidd, Knowles asserted that the adult learner has been a neglected species.⁵

Currently there are three major theories of adult learning: andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning.⁶ For the sake of this chapter I will limit my scope to two, given their prevalence in the literature as well as their similar principles: andragogy (most often associated with Malcolm Knowles) and transformational learning (most often associated with Jack Mezirow). Both of these theories point to similar practical conclusions related to this project.

Andragogy

Andragogy is built as a theory by drawing contrasts to pedagogy. It is in the drawing of distinctions between children and adults that much of the content for andragogy is formed, both philosophically and in its practical implications for teachers. Knowles bases this theory of andragogy on four main assumptions that are different than pedagogy.⁷

First, andragogy is a recognition of the changes in self-concept between children and adults. As a person grows and matures their self-concept moves from total dependency (like with an infant) to one of increasing self-directedness. When a person

⁴ Knowles, 28.

⁵ Knowles, 27.

⁶ Literacy Information and Communication System, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, “TEAL Center Fact Sheet No. 11: Adult Learning Theories,” Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy from the American Institute for Research. Accessed October 16, 2019. https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/11_%20TEAL_Adult_Learning_Theory.pdf.

⁷ Knowles, 55.

reaches adulthood they achieve a self-concept of essential self-direction and develop a deep psychological need to be perceived by others as self-directing. According to Knowles, putting such persons in an educational situation where they are treated like children creates a tension between that situation and their self-concept. Typical education situations, such as a classroom with a single authoritarian voice, better aligns with the dependent self-conception of a child.⁸

Second, Knowles discusses the role of experience. As an individual matures they have an increasing amount of life experience upon which to draw that becomes a rich resource for learning.

In the technology of andragogy there is a decreasing emphasis on the transmittal techniques of traditional teaching and increasing emphasis on experiential techniques which tap the experience of learners and involve them in analyzing their experience. The use of lectures, canned audio-visual presentations, and assigned reading tend to fade in favor of discussion, laboratory, simulation, field experience, team project, and other action-learning techniques.⁹

Knowles makes another more subtle argument for the different role of experience for adults. He suggests that as children we primarily relate experience to things done to us. We see experience through external means such as parents, siblings, school and church, etc. As one matures, Knowles claims, adults see experiences as self-defining. Rather than merely an external reality, our experiences become integral to our identity. So a situation where one's experience is ignored is perceived by an adult as a rejection not just of an outside influence, but as a rejection of himself or herself as a person. Andragogy, then,

⁸ Knowles, 55-56.

⁹ Knowles, 56.

attempts to respect an adult's personhood by making use of their accumulated experience as a resource for learning.¹⁰

The third assumption relates to one's readiness to learn. Knowles claims that children are assumed to be ready to learn based on their physical developmental stage. He asserts, however, that adults are ready to learn not based on a physical development, but out of necessity for a new role being exercised. For example, an adult exhibits a much greater readiness to learn when in a presenting circumstance, such as preparing to become a parent. Knowles suggests that much adult learning is merely offered based on a particular stage of life, rather than a presenting circumstance which increases readiness to learn. He asserts that this creates many scenarios where adult learning is out of sync with the appropriate time that an adult is most prepared to learn based on the need for that content.¹¹

Finally, Knowles discusses the difference between how children and adults are oriented to learning. He argues that children have a "subject-centered orientation to most learning, whereas adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning."¹² Knowles relates this to the difference in perspective related to time between children and adults. Children learn primarily for future oriented tasks: completing high school, getting into college, preparing for a future career. Adults come to learning usually for a specific deficiency or with a problem at hand. They want to apply tomorrow what they learned today, and this immediacy of application creates a problem-centered approach to

¹⁰ Knowles, 56-57.

¹¹ Knowles, 57-58.

¹² Knowles, 58.

learning. This assumption, if true, changes the way you organize what you teach adults. Instead of curriculum based on a logical progression of subjects, Knowles suggests that adult learning be organized around perceived problems to be solved. He goes on to offer anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of this change in an adult education program at Boston University. He suggests that adult students were significantly more engaged when they could see the immediacy of the impact of learning.¹³

One of the clearest summaries of andragogy I found to be when Knowles looks back to a pioneer in the education field, Eduard C. Lindeman, and his work in 1926, “The Meaning of Adult Education.” Knowles draws on Lindeman to highlight several key assumptions about adult learners that he says have been supported by continued research and have formed a foundation for modern learning theory:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; therefore these are the appropriate starting points for organizing adult learning activities.
2. Adults’ orientation to learning is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects.
3. Experience is the richest resource for adults’ learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.
4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it.

¹³ Knowles, 57-58.

5. Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning.¹⁴

Each of these assumptions have practical implications for the design of learning experiences for adults. In the conclusion to this chapter I draw conclusions for my project design that relate to these key assumptions.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory finds its roots in the work of Jack Mezirow, who looks at adult education through the lens of transformation theory. Beginning with a theoretical assessment of how people change, Mezirow builds a practical theory of learning for adults informed by principles of transformation.¹⁵ Transformative learning is “an approach to teaching based on promoting change, where educators challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them.”¹⁶

Edward Taylor describes the general concept of transformative learning by identifying the core elements that frame this approach to teaching. Taylor identifies these essential components: individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, holistic

¹⁴ Knowles, 31.

¹⁵ Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1991, 4.

¹⁶ Jack Mezirow, Edward W. Taylor, and associates, eds. *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2009, xi.

orientation, awareness of context, and authentic relationships.¹⁷ Taylor suggests that all of these specific components are necessary for pursuing a learner-centered approach to teaching in general, where the power is more balanced between teachers and students in the classroom through shared decision making, evaluation and other responsibilities.¹⁸

In comparing transformative learning to a more general understanding of learning, Mezirow writes, “Transformative learning may be defined as learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change.”¹⁹ He goes on to relate this concept to the broader field of epistemology. “Transformative learning may be understood as the epistemology of how adults learn to reason for themselves—advance and assess reasons for making a judgment—rather than act on the assimilated beliefs, values, feelings, and judgments of others.”

Mezirow also sees a tie between the concept of transformative learning and the field of psychology.²⁰ And he even pushes into new areas of development within the field that go so far as to suggest that transformative learning can be viewed as the vehicle for arriving at a new cosmology.²¹ It seems those in the field of Transformative Learning

¹⁷ Edward W. Taylor, “Fostering Transformative Learning,” In *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, edited by Jack Mezirow, Edward W. Taylor, and associates, 4.

¹⁸ Taylor, 14.

¹⁹ Jack Mezirow, “Transformative Learning Theory,” In *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, edited by Jack Mezirow, Edward W. Taylor, and associates, 22.

²⁰ Mezirow, “Transformative Learning Theory,” 24-26.

²¹ Mezirow, “Transformative Learning Theory,” 28.

believe this understanding of education has significant ability to shape and reshape adult students, even in the most fundamental ways they view the world.

Mezirow makes a strong connection between Transformative Learning Theory and andragogy. In *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* Mezirow outlines twelve principles for practitioners of andragogy, which he defines as “an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners.”²²

These twelve principles include:

1. Progressively decrease the learner’s dependency on the educator.
2. Help the learner understand how to use learning resources, especially the experience of others, including the educator, and how to engage in reciprocal learning relationships.
3. Assist the learner to define his/her learning needs, both in terms of immediate awareness and in terms of understanding the cultural and psychological assumptions influencing his/her perceptions of needs.
4. Assist the learner to assume increasing responsibility for defining learning objectives, planning his/her own learning program, and evaluating progress.
5. Help the learner organize what is to be learned in relationship to his/her personal problems, concerns, and levels of understanding.
6. Foster learner decision making, select relevant learning experiences that require choosing, expand the learner’s range of options, and facilitate the

²² Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 199.

learner's taking the perspectives of others who have alternative ways of understanding.

7. Encourage the use of criteria for judging that are increasingly inclusive and differentiating in awareness, self-reflexive, and integrative of experience.
8. Foster a self-corrective, reflexive approach to learning—to typifying and labeling, to perspective taking and choosing, and to habits of learning and learning relationships.
9. Facilitate posing and solving problems, including problems associated with the implementation of individual and collective action, and recognition of the relationship between personal problems and public issues.
10. Reinforce the self-concept of the learner as a learner and doer by providing progressive mastery and for a supportive climate with feedback to encourage provisional efforts to change and to take risks; by avoiding competitive judgment of performance; and by appropriate use of mutual support groups.
11. Emphasize experiential, participative, and projective instructional methods and use modeling and learning contracts where appropriate.
12. Make the moral distinction between helping the learner understand his/her full range of choices and ways to improve the quality of choosing and encouraging the learner to make a specific choice.²³

While I will summarize connections to this DMin project at the end of this chapter, I want to quickly highlight here how several of these twelve principles from

²³ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 199-200.

Mezirow reveal relevant insights for the design of this project. The first is that the learner's dependency on the educator is continually decreased. When working with adults the goal is to continually minimize the role of the educator in order to promote sustained self-learning.

Mezirow also notes in these principles several ways in which experience and participation should be a priority in instructional methods. This reinforces what I have already highlighted from Knowles. Mezirow also notes the importance of learning that comes through contact with other learners (an element I will highlight in my conclusion and related project design) and reflective discourse throughout the learning process.²⁴ Mezirow states, "Helping adults elaborate, create and transform their meaning schemes (beliefs, feelings, interpretations, decisions) through reflection on their content, the process by which they were learned, and their premises (social, context, history, and consequences) is what andragogy is about."²⁵

Mezirow summarizes the basic goals that ought to be incorporated into a philosophy of adult education as follows: helping learners to be self-guided, self-reflective, and rational and helping to establish communities of discourse in which these qualities are honored and fostered.²⁶ Overall, "Transformative learning is often described as learning that changes the way individuals think about themselves and their world, and that involves a shift of consciousness."²⁷ Adults need to be led to a place where they

²⁴ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 201.

²⁵ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 201.

²⁶ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 224.

²⁷ TEAL, 2.

begin to understand their own assumptions, have those assumptions challenged by peers and experience, and then discover a new way of seeing the world after having those assumptions disrupted.

Transformative learning involves reflectively transforming the beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions that constitute our meaning schemes or transforming our meaning perspectives (sets of related meaning schemes). The relationship between educator and adult learner in this kind of learning is like that of a mentor trying to help a friend decide how to deal with a significant life problem that the friend may not yet have clearly identified as the source of his or her dilemma. The educator helps the learner focus upon and examine the assumptions—epistemological, social, and psychological—that underlie beliefs, feelings, and actions; assess the consequences of these assumptions; identify and explore alternative sets of assumptions; and test the validity of assumptions through effective participation in reflective dialogue.²⁸

Connecting Adult Learning Theories to Spiritual Formation

In all of these theories and discoveries within adult education there is a significant overlap of concepts that relate to discipleship. While not a lot of material has been written on this point of convergence, a few thinkers have begun to explore the relationship. For example, Ellen Marmon has written an article entitled, “Transformative Learning Theory: Connections with Christian Education.”²⁹ Marmon makes the case that church leaders ought to take cues from Transformative Learning Theory in how they structure intentional formation initiatives. She writes, “Adults encounter something new (information, experience, etc.); then they reflect and talk with others about the accuracy and adequacy of their assumptions being challenged. Insights often reveal the need for changing those assumptions and the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that accompany

²⁸ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 223-224.

²⁹ Ellen L. Marmon, “Transformative Learning Theory: Connections with Christian Adult Education,” *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 424–31.

them.”³⁰ Marmon acknowledges the difficulty of adult learning and thinks Christians ought to use wisdom in how we structure our learning strategies. “Adult learning is tricky; grown men and women often must unlearn long-held, unexamined assumptions before they are ready to embrace new understandings.”³¹

Marmon believes that Transformative Learning Theory actually correlates nicely with Christian values. “The key dynamics of TLT are elements of education that Christians value: honest relationships, life experience, thoughtful consideration of what God is teaching through the experience, and possible realignment of attitudes, dispositions, and actions to reflect God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.”³² She goes on to state, “Transformative Learning Theory acknowledges the challenges of adult life and sees those challenges as opportunities that can align our thinking, feeling, and doing with current reality more fully.”³³

Christopher Beard also attempts to make this correlation in his article, “Connecting Spiritual Formation and Adult Learning Theory: An Examination of Common Principles.”³⁴ Beard draws on both andragogy and Transformational Learning Theory in his connection to spiritual formation. He chooses to use both together because they have such common philosophical underpinnings when compared to discipleship

³⁰ Marmon, 425.

³¹ Marmon, 425.

³² Marmon, 429.

³³ Marmon, 430.

³⁴ Christopher B. Beard “Connecting Spiritual Formation and Adult Learning Theory: An Examination of Common Principles,” *Christian Education Journal* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 247–69.

goals.³⁵ He acknowledges that, despite the clear connections, very little has been written to connect these fields to the area of discipleship.³⁶

Beard spends significant time connecting spiritual formation to the assumptions Knowles espouses related to andragogy that I have already outlined in that section above. In each case he shows that this progression of adult learning is illuminating in understanding how disciples are formed. For example, when discussing Knowles's assumption regarding the difference between child and adult self-conception, Beard writes,

While missional spiritual formation may begin with information and a dependency on a more mature mentor, that mentor or discipler is to follow the example of Jesus and help the learner move from a cognitive understanding of God's expectations, to an environment in which those expectations can be witnessed in action, to a point where the learner is encouraged to live out those expectations within his or her life.³⁷

By understanding the way adults naturally move towards self-directed learning, as compared to the dependent learning of children, Beard shows that this same principle is at work in adult discipling relationships.

Beard notes that "due to the experiential nature of missional spiritual formation, learners often encounter new circumstances for which they are not equipped, causing a virtually immediate desire for learning and application of knowledge."³⁸ This correlates perfectly with Knowles's understanding of andragogy. "If spiritual formation efforts are

³⁵ Beard, 252.

³⁶ Beard, 250.

³⁷ Beard, 253.

³⁸ Beard, 254.

going to be productive, the life of the individual learner must be considered, and much like andragogy, the focus must be on the unique learner rather than content.”³⁹

Beard makes similarly strong connections between spiritual formation and Mezirow’s work on Transformational Learning. For example, he highlights a major theme of Mezirow, that transformational learning disorients a person’s current assumptions and life constructs in order to make room for new discoveries to be made. In the undermining of assumptions new world views can emerge. Beard argues that this is necessary in the process of discipleship where every component of life must be re-imagined and re-oriented in order to discover a life of obedience to following Jesus.⁴⁰

One major theme that emerges from Beard’s correlation between discipleship and adult learning theory is the role of experience:

Missional discipleship gives priority to and requires experience as a part of the learning process. While the cognitive aspect of knowledge is still considered a priority to learn biblical content, the goal is not a transfer of biblical knowledge alone, but knowledge that emerges as biblical reality is lived and experienced... Therefore, spiritual formation is both augmented by and depends on experience as a key to transformation and discipleship.⁴¹

This is a clear connecting point to both andragogy and the practical implementation of Transformative Learning.

“Missional discipleship acknowledges that information transmission in a classroom-type setting is only one way adults learn, and using the example of Jesus, experiential learning in mentorship/apprenticeship relationships and by contextual

³⁹ Beard, 255.

⁴⁰ Beard, 257.

⁴¹ Beard, 261.

immersion is given priority.”⁴² Beard shows that this experiential emphasis in adult learning makes sense of what has been emphasized in some spiritual formation literature. He quotes both Knowles and Mezirow in making this case.⁴³ Beard concludes succinctly: “Experience in the context of practice is the facilitator of true learning and growth as experiences create opportunities to learn and grow.”⁴⁴ For Beard the bottom line is that, “if the way adults learn is not considered, the design of adult formation efforts are likely to be random and possibly ineffective.”⁴⁵

Connections to this Project

This project assumes that the state of personal evangelism understanding and practice is in poor shape in many United Methodist congregations. In order to improve evangelism practice, it seeks to implement a training exercise that reorients church members in their understanding and personal practice of evangelism. In order to design this training I draw upon the principles of adult education theory, which will potentially help produce greater lasting effect in the lives of participants. Several elements of project design draw upon principles from andragogy and transformative learning:

First, the project design emphasizes the role of experience. One of the clearest principles that emerges in adult education theory is that adults learn by doing. “Because adults learn by doing, effective instruction focuses on tasks that adults can perform,

⁴² Beard, 262.

⁴³ Beard, 262.

⁴⁴ Beard, 262.

⁴⁵ Beard, 264.

rather than on memorization of content.”⁴⁶ Even the earliest literature in this field arrives at this conclusion. For example, Kidd writes, in 1959:

Some psychologists studying learning have done so in the classroom or under contrived conditions in the laboratory. Others have drawn inferences from learning behavior wherever they have been able to observe it. But all agree that learning is most effective if carried on under conditions similar to where the knowledge, skill, or attitude will be practiced. By effective we simply mean a tendency that what is learned will be utilized and applied.⁴⁷

If learning is most effective under conditions similar to where the learning will be practiced, then it is my assertion that evangelism training has the best possibility of transforming a person’s practice if the training is “hands-on.” Thus, participants will spend approximately one to two hours in a classroom learning environment and twice that much time on the streets actually implementing what has been taught.

Second, the project will incorporate significant time for reflective learning. Participants will be given ample time to debrief their field experience with each other in order to identify what they were experiencing both internally and externally in the process. This emphasis on reflection after experience is a consistent recommendation in adult learning literature.

Third, this training experience will be very relational. Participants will have a great deal of interaction with one another. Adult learning theories such andragogy suggest that peer to peer relationship is a key catalyst for adult learning.

Fourth, the project will incorporate significant elements of self-directed learning. Much of the training day, especially the field experience, is self-directed. While content

⁴⁶ TEAL, 1.

⁴⁷ Kidd, 257.

is shared in the classroom setting, how it gets implemented, and where participants go to do their field experience, is selected by the individuals or within peer groups. This allows adults to become true participants in their learning and connects with my previous discussion of Knowles understanding of adult's self-conception.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

While working in United Methodist congregations across the United States, I have seen serious decline firsthand. In chapter one I demonstrated that decline statistically for typical United Methodist churches, and highlighted a specific local church as an example. I also shared research that illuminates some of the decline from historical data.

My own faith journey and experience in ministry have given me a passion for evangelism. Both in my formative early years, as well as in later vocational ministry roles, I have witnessed evangelism efforts with tremendous effect. I have also witnessed firsthand the stagnation apparent in congregations where evangelism has ceased to be a priority.

It is the intersection of this deeply formed passion and the needs of my current ministry context of working alongside declining United Methodist churches that provides the impetus for this project. In that place of synergy, I decided to pursue a project that tests the effect of implementing new evangelism training in churches with the goal of adjusting personal perceptions about evangelism as well as increased personal practices related to evangelism.

After establishing the overall project theme and hypothesis I turned my attention to building a foundation for the project through biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary research.

As an anchor biblical text I selected John 4:1-42. This gospel narrative includes an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman that demonstrates the salvific mission of God that crosses beyond traditional Jewish boundaries. Jesus models a mission he would later commend to his disciples by crossing into Samaria. And in this encounter Jesus shows a willingness to intentionally cross moral, gender, and social barriers in order to share his life-giving message with a single woman. I argued that this encounter provides an example of the kind of barrier-crossing evangelism necessary in a post-Christendom North America where people are less likely to come to a traditional religious setting to hear the message of Christianity. The text also highlights the multiplying effect of this encounter as the woman impacted quickly becomes an evangelist herself to her own town.

In chapter three I used early Methodist field preaching as an historical example of this same barrier-crossing principle. I gave evidence that field preaching played a crucial role in the worldwide expansion of Methodism. By highlighting both the self-identified motives of leaders like Whitefield and Wesley, as well as more modern analysis of the practice, I showed that the evangelistic principles behind field preaching were a major factor in the movement reaching people who had not been reached by more traditional religious practices at the time.

This historical analysis not only offers a precedent for the principles that drive my project, but also finds important connection with my context. The declining United Methodist churches in mind for this project all find their roots, at least tangentially, in a movement originally fueled by field preaching. This historical connection adds further motivation to rediscover a modern equivalent driven by the same evangelistic principles.

Looking through the lens of Leslie Newbigin's seminal work, I highlighted the missionary nature of the church. I argued, in light of Newbigin's keen insights, that the church does not simply have a task of evangelism, but is missional by its very nature. Therefore evangelism is a core part of its identity. To lose that practice is not to simply drop one program from the church, but to lose something of the fundamental DNA of what it means to be a church. In addition, to take evangelism seriously as a church means that the individuals who make up that church have a particular role to play, whether in their vocation, in their embodiment of particular communal practices, or in their literal proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Finally, I turned to the actual design of my project to show that adult learning theory has proven that experiential learning which leads adults towards self-discovery is more effective than models that only seek to transfer information from teacher to student. In light of adult education theory, I designed a training that is more hands-on than many evangelism classes have been in recent church practice. Much modern church education utilizes more traditional means of information sharing, including for evangelism. But to introduce evangelism practices which may be quite foreign to many current United Methodist congregations, it is imperative to provide actual experience in evangelism, especially if it is to be retained as an ongoing practice.

Pulling on the threads of my own personal experience, contextual analysis, biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary research, I have established a significant case both for the need of this project, as well as the design to be used. I have demonstrated a continuity of principles between my personal ministry experience, current United Methodist need, the ministry of Jesus, and the ministry of Methodism's founders.

Built upon additional foundations of the nature of church and educational theory, this project was designed to test one possible method for shifting the understanding and practice of evangelism for church attendees in an era of church decline.

One important caveat is necessary at this point. The implementation of this project was greatly impacted by the current global COVID-19 pandemic. The uniqueness of this rare global health crisis has forced me to adjust the methods used for training. In-person and experiential activities were impossible to do in a safe way that would be in accordance with current government recommendations. For this reason, I was forced to change the final design of the project to become an online class with suggested tangible action steps assigned for personal implementation. While I will show that the data suggests this indeed yielded some learning, it was not reflective of my original desire for this project, nor does the implementation align perfectly with some of the learnings covered in the foundations chapters, especially the interdisciplinary work on adult education theory. In what follows I will outline both the original design intended as well as the modified design that was used.

Methodology and Implementation

The basic design of this project, after appropriate adjustments for pandemic considerations, consisted of an online class centered on the topic of evangelism, with experiential action steps encouraged for participants to try out individually. The effect of this training was then tested by assessing participants to determine if any change occurred in participant perceptions about evangelism and/or in their willingness to engage in conversations about spiritual topics outside of church settings. My hope was that after

this training participants would express a greater sense of personal responsibility for evangelism and to more frequently engage in intentional spiritual conversations outside of their local church setting.

The test group was assessed with surveys and interviews prior to the training, an additional survey immediately following the training, and then another round of surveys and interviews two months after the conclusion of the training. These surveys and interviews helped to reveal whether the training changed perceptions about personal evangelism with the test group. The testing also tracked whether the training increased the number of occasions where participants intentionally looked for evangelism opportunities.

My project training was offered to the congregants of Stillwater United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio, where I serve as Discipleship Coordinator. This is another adjustment in light of the pandemic. My ministry with Spirit and Truth discussed in chapter one has no longer been able to travel and interact with churches around the country as previously described.

In place of a church engaged with the ministry of Spirit and Truth, my home church served as an appropriate alternative. It is a United Methodist congregation who has experienced growth and decline in its lifecycle.

The class was advertised through normal church communication mediums such as announcements, social media posts, and the church email newsletter. Seventeen persons registered to be a part of the class. Fifteen agreed to participate in the doctoral research portion. Prior to participating in the class participants who agreed to be included in the research portion were sent an informed consent form.

The overall methodological approach was designed to create engagement among participants. Class discussion was highly encouraged. The training consisted of three ninety-minute sessions using the online software Zoom. Each session included a personal challenge where participants could take small steps towards feeling more comfortable in faith-sharing situations. The beginning of each subsequent session was reserved for participants to report on their experience and for collaborative learning to occur among classmates. This experiential approach is in line with the adult learning theory discussed in chapter five. While not fully substituting for the original design of in-person outreach activities together, this did allow for personal experimentation and self-discovery.

Initial Design

In order to test my initial hypothesis I designed an evangelism training experience intended to empower individual believers within a congregation to engage in personal faith sharing and to teach an understanding of evangelism that puts the burden upon the body of believers to live as sent ones, rather than focusing our primary efforts on attractional models. In multiplying the number of congregation members who have this more missional perspective and are actively sharing their faith, I believe we can, in time, make a difference in the overall culture of a church. For the scope of this project, however, I planned not to try to gauge the effect on the larger congregation, but rather to keep my scope focused on the effect of the faith sharing understanding and practices on the individual Christians who participated in the study.

The training was to be conducted by myself as the teacher. The outreach phase was to consist of two separate times wherein teams would be sent into the community to

offer to pray for people and look for opportunities to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The approach being taught was to be very non-confrontational, low pressure, and was to include teaching on understanding cultural and interpersonal dynamics. A significant emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit and discernment would have been included.

After the initial two-hour training, teams of four were to be formed. At this stage volunteers who had previously participated in this style of outreach would have been utilized to lead teams. This would ensure that each team had one person who had been previously trained by me in this technique and had first-hand experience on a similar outreach.

Each of the study participants would have then left the church building with their team leader and prayerfully discerned a location to go and find people to pray and speak with. Teams would have had approximately two hours for this exercise before returning to the church at an agreed upon time.

After this first outreach exercise lunch would have been provided to all participants. During lunch, participants would have had the opportunity to share about their experience and debrief as a large group. They would have been encouraged to share their learnings, both positive and negative, with each other. After allowing approximately two hours for lunch and sharing, I planned to offer some brief reminders about our morning training before again forming teams for the afternoon exercise. Teams would have been shuffled for the afternoon to ensure participants interacted with different team members and team leaders.

Teams again would have been given approximately two hours for this second outreach exercise before returning to the church. Upon returning there would have been additional time for sharing with the group before the day concluded.

Adjustments Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The following adjustments were made to the final project design due to the ongoing global health crisis:

1. The training was conducted online using Zoom video conferencing software.
2. Interviews occurred using Zoom as well, rather than in person.
3. Surveys were handled remotely via electronic means.
4. Training occurred over a series of three once-per-week 90-minute sessions rather than a single Saturday.
5. Practical application was encouraged for participants on their own and within their current circles of influence, including but not limited to family, co-workers, and neighbors.
6. Practical application for participants encouraged social distancing for any spiritual conversations they pursued and were encouraged to be done over the phone or an electronic device.
7. Participant survey and interview questions remained the same as the original design and are included below.
8. The project timeline was adjusted so that interviews occurred one week prior to the first training class and two months after the final training class.

9. Surveys were conducted using an online system, rather than in person. These surveys were sent out one week prior to the first class, immediately after the final class, and two months after the final class.
10. The overall focus and content of the training remained unchanged.

Training Content

This following outline highlights the topics that were covered in this evangelism training:

Week 1: Background

- Statistical discussion and analysis of evangelism practice and perceptions in U.S. Christianity
- Making the shift from seeing corporate worship as the primary place of reaching new people towards a view of church members seeing themselves as personally engaged in outreach
- Biblical example from Jesus's encounter with the woman at the well in John 4
- Field preaching in early Methodism as an example of evangelism principles

Week 2: Practical Learning Part 1

- Examining the relationships between spiritual discernment and evangelism
- Understanding different contexts and how context impacts personal evangelism
- Testimonies that under-gird these principles
- Best practices for personal faith sharing engagement

Week 3: Practical Learning Part 2

- Discussion of personal learning from participants so far
- Basics of articulating the Christian gospel message
- How sharing the gospel must relate to discipleship and best practices for follow-up
- Personal challenges for next steps of putting this content into practice in normal life routine, as well as corporate church activities

Survey and Interview Questions

The survey before training, immediately after training, and two-months post-training were identical in order to gauge any variation in answers based on participant learning and experience. The following are the questions that were included on those three surveys:

1. How would you define evangelism?
2. Which of these is the most effective way a church can reach people who do not yet attend your church: a. advertising and marketing in the community, b. offering programs that meet people's needs, c. helping church members reach out to other people personally, e. inviting people to weekend worship services.
3. Would you say that sharing with other people outside the church about how to become a Christian is: a. very important, b. somewhat important, c. somewhat unimportant, d. not important, e. not sure
4. When was the last time you had a conversation about spiritual things with someone outside of your home or church community?

5. How many times in the past month have you offered to pray with someone outside of your home or church community?
6. Approximately how many times in the past month have you intentionally explained something about your faith to someone outside your home or church community?
7. Was your faith-sharing activity in the past two months typical for you? a. The past two months have been typical for me, b. I have shared my faith more in the past two months than is typical for me, c. I have shared my faith less in the past two months than is typical for me.

The following are the questions that were asked in the initial and post-training interviews:

1. Describe your understanding of evangelism.
2. What are the most effective ways that a church reaches new people?
3. When was the last time you had a conversation with someone about spiritual things outside of your home or church community?
4. How often do you look for opportunities to share about your faith in Jesus Christ with others outside or your home or church community?
5. What barriers, if any, do you believe inhibit you taking initiative to share your faith with others?

These questions allowed me to assess changes in a participant's perception of evangelism in general, as well as to gauge any movement in a participant's actual practice of having spiritual conversations with persons outside the church.

Summary of Learning

In the three surveys conducted, varying numbers of people participated in each iteration. In the pre-survey 15 persons participated. In the initial post-survey 7 persons participated. In the final survey, two months after the conclusion of the class, 8 persons participated. In the personal interviews, three persons participated in both the pre-interview and two-month post-interview.

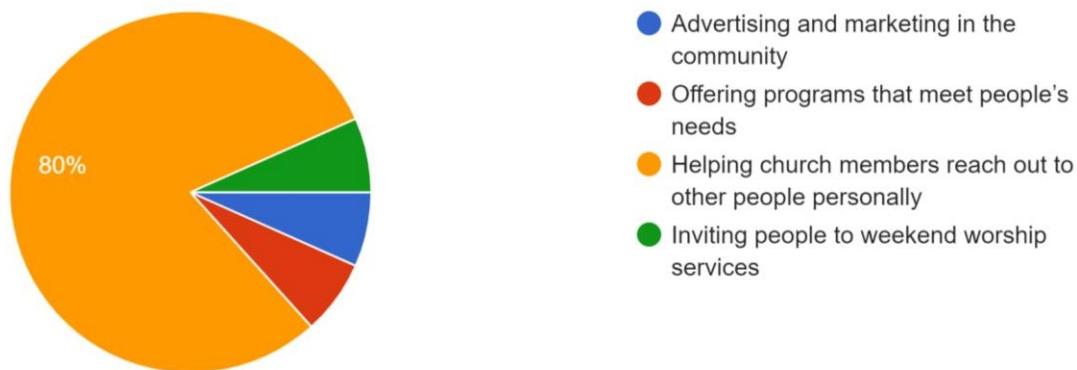
In order to attempt to track changes across individual responses, persons self-selected a four-digit number to use on each survey. This was to allow for analysis across surveys while maintaining anonymity. This worked partially but there were some issues. Apparently, there are a couple of individuals who forgot their identification number, because two individuals who completed the final survey two-months after the class gave numbers that had not been used in either of the previous surveys. Of those who participated in multiple surveys: five persons completed all three surveys, two completed the first two surveys but not the last, and one person completed the first and third survey without completing the second.

Analysis of Multiple Choice Questions

The easiest analysis emerges from the multiple-choice questions where less interpretation is required. Out of seven total questions on the surveys, three are multiple-choice. The following charts shows the overall response to these questions.

Question #2 - Pre-Survey

Which of these is the most effective way a church can reach people who do not yet attend your church?



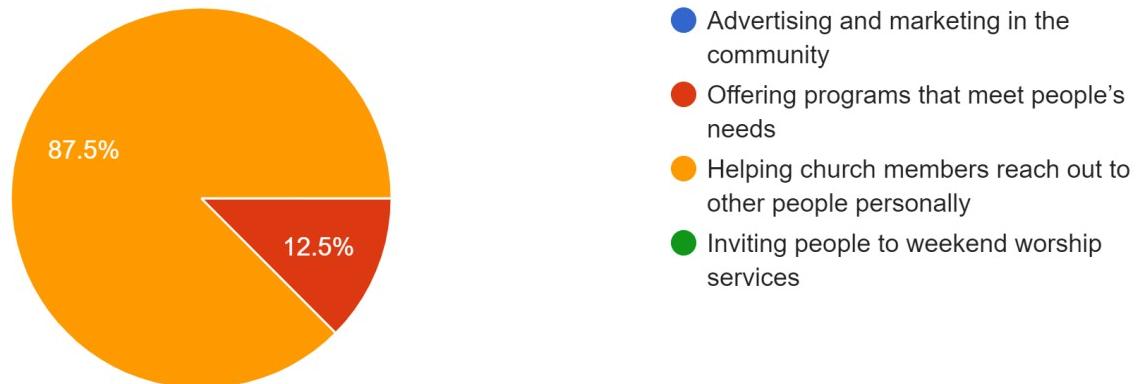
Question #2 - Post-Survey

Which of these is the most effective way a church can reach people who do not yet attend your church?



Question #2 - Final-Survey

Which of these is the most effective way a church can reach people who do not yet attend your church?



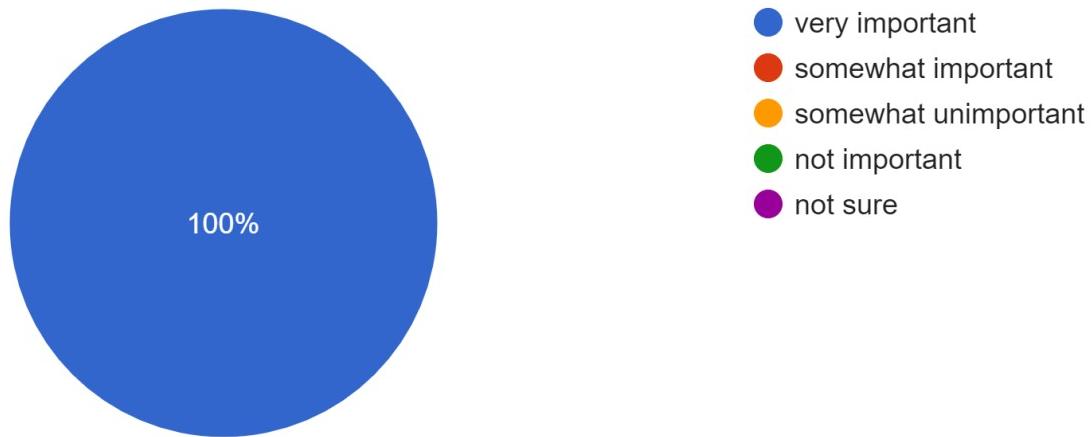
Question two attempts to gauge participants' perceptions of how they view effective means of evangelism. In the initial survey, 12 out of 15 participants, representing 80% of responses, chose "helping church members reach out to other people personally." This is the response that most closely aligns with the content taught in the class. Immediately following the class there does seem to be some shift towards this answer, as 100% of respondents chose this answer. In the final survey seven out eight selected this answer, representing 87.5% of responses. Examining the individual responses is perhaps more enlightening. Two out of the three persons who selected an answer other than this preferred response in the first survey went on to change their answer to "helping church members reach out to other people personally" as their response in both of the final two surveys. The third person who responded with a different answer in the pre-survey did not participate in either of the final two surveys. In the final survey, the one person who answered differently did not participate in either of the first two surveys or perhaps forgot their number. So, for the two people I am able to

track actual change in their answers, both moved from a different answer on the first survey to the desired answer and sustained that answer through the final survey.

While this is a small sample size, and definitive conclusions cannot be made, it suggests that the class material did change the perception of some participants in relation to how they think the church can best reach new people. In terms of the material being offered and the desired outcomes for this class, that is a positive sign of its effectiveness.

Question #3 – All Surveys

Would you say that sharing with other people outside the church about how to become a Christian is:



In all three surveys 100% of respondents indicated that they believe it is “very important” to share with other people outside the church about how to become a Christian. Clearly no change can be seen from the class because the responses were unvaried. This might indicate that those who signed up for the class were among those more highly motivated in faith-sharing. This seems like a plausible theory because of this being a purely voluntary offering. It is likely those who see faith-sharing a priority will be

motivated to sign up for such a class. It could also indicate something about a culture or taught value in the host church, but these possible interpretations are conjecture.

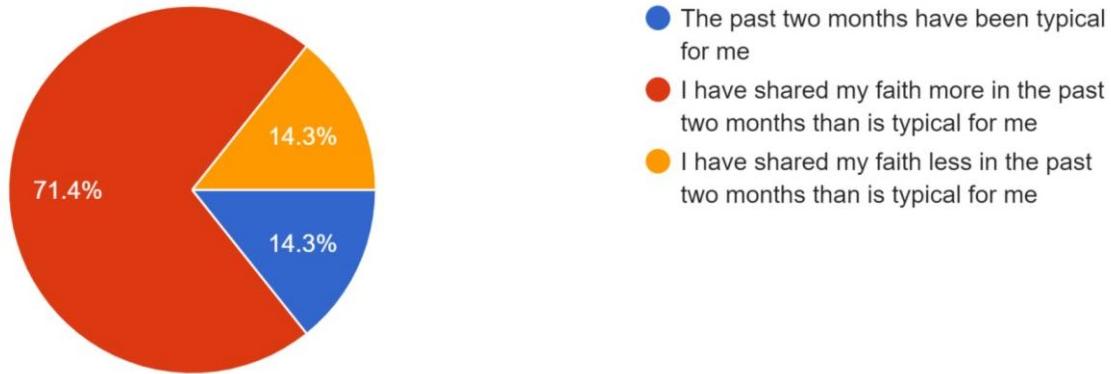
Question #7 – Pre-Survey

Was your faith-sharing activity in the past two months typical for you?



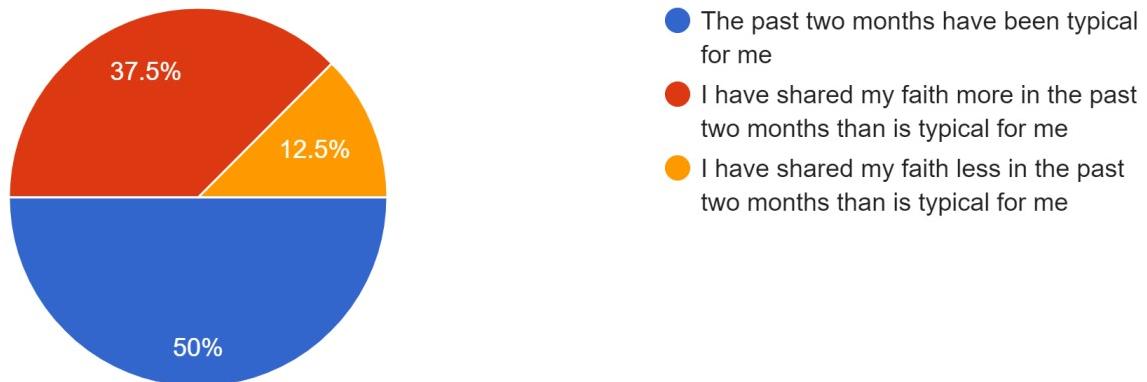
Question #7 – Post-Survey

Was your faith-sharing activity in the past two months typical for you?



Question #7 – Final Survey

Was your faith-sharing activity in the past two months typical for you?



The final multiple-choice question is perhaps the most interesting in terms of apparent results from the class. In the pre-survey two-thirds of respondents said that the prior two months had been typical for them in their faith-sharing activity. Immediately after the class 71.4% of respondents indicated that they had shared their faith more in the past two months than what is typical for them. This indicates a self-perception among those who participated in the post-survey of increased faith-sharing activity. Likely this is a direct result of the personal challenges issued as a part of the class which encouraged practical steps in this area.

After two months the numbers did decline on this question. Only 37.5% of respondents indicated that they had shared their faith more than is typical for them in the time period since the class. There are at least two possible explanations for this. First, the immediate post-survey shows that participants shared their faith more as part of class activity and then returned to more normal habits in the two months following. Second, there is a chance that participants now have a higher view of what their normal faith-sharing activity looks like and this increased baseline causes them to rate themselves as

typical rather than above typical. It is impossible to tell which is more likely, but it very well could be a combination of both factors. Overall, there was a clear shift in this final multiple-choice question that seems to indicate at least some increase in some participants self-perceived faith-sharing activity.

Analysis of Numerical Questions

Out of the seven questions, three were multiple choice as already described, and another three were short answers that would be responses indicating numerical values of time or frequency. The following is an analysis of these three numerical questions.

The first numerical question was, “When was the last time you had a conversation about spiritual things with someone outside of your home or church community?”

Participants were free to insert any word or phrase in response to this question. In order to organize for analysis, I grouped answers into several categories (see below).

Last time for a spiritual conversation – PRE-SURVEY (15 respondents)	
Response	Number of Respondents
Within the past day	0
Within the past week	4
Within the past month	6
Within the past 6 months	1
Within the past year	1
Cannot Remember	3

Last time for a spiritual conversation – POST-SURVEY (7 respondents)	
Response	Number of Respondents
Within the past day	1
Within the past week	1
Within the past month	3
Within the past 6 months	0
Within the past year	0
Cannot Remember	2

Last time for a spiritual conversation – FINAL-SURVEY (8 respondents)	
Response	Number of Respondents
Within the past day	1
Within the past week	4
Within the past month	0
Within the past 6 months	3
Within the past year	0
Cannot Remember	0

By examining these results we can observe several interesting phenomena. In the pre-survey 10 out of 15 respondents noted having a spiritual conversation outside of home or church in the last month. This represents 66%. This percentage increases slightly with the post-survey, likely highlighting some persons acting upon class learnings during the three-week class period. The statistic drops back down into the sixty percentile range

for the final survey, showing a return to normal habits. It appears, based on the expressed timing, that persons acted upon the prompts to have spiritual conversations during the class, but individuals who made new steps may not have made additional attempts at spiritual conversation in the months following. Individual analysis for this question is more illuminating. In sum, those who had spiritual conversations most recently in the pre-survey were the same persons who had recent spiritual conversations in the subsequent surveys.

The second numerical question was, “How many times in the past month have you offered to pray with someone outside of your home or church community?” As with the first question of this type, respondents could insert any numerical value or phrase for this question. For analysis purposes I grouped responses into several categories (see below):

Number of times offering to pray in past month – PRE-SURVEY	
(15 respondents)	
Response	Number of Respondents
0	5
1 or 2	7
2 to 5	1
5 to 10	1
Over 10	1

Number of times offering to pray in past month – POST-SURVEY
(7 respondents)

Response	Number of Respondents
0	0
1 or 2	4
2 to 5	1
5 to 10	1
Over 10	1

Number of times offering to pray in past month – FINAL-SURVEY
(8 respondents)

Response	Number of Respondents
0	0
1 or 2	2
2 to 5	3
5 to 10	1
Over 10	2

This question demonstrates significant change among participantss. In the initial survey 5 out of 15 respondents said they had offered to pray for someone zero times in the past month outside of home or church. In the post and final surveys there are no persons in that category. There is a clear trend of increase in the number of times persons are offering to pray for persons. This was a key component of the training class so the

results are not unexpected and hopeful. After the encouragement and training of the class it seems that participants were likely to offer prayer more often. Not only were there fewer people responding that they had offered prayer zero times, there were also people increasing the number of times they did so. For example, one participant responded on the pre-survey that they had offered prayer once in the past month. In the final survey, two months later, they indicated they had done so six times in the past month. In examining the five respondents who completed all three surveys, three out of five increased the number of times they offered to pray and two said they offered prayer the same amount of times when comparing the pre-survey to the final survey. Overall, there does seem to be a measurable increase in the number of times people were offering to pray for individuals outside of their church and home settings.

The final numerical question was, “Approximately how many times in the past month have you intentionally explained something about your faith to someone outside your home or church community?” I have again grouped responses into several categories for analysis.

Number of times explaining their faith – PRE-SURVEY	
(15 respondents)	
Response	Number of Respondents
0	6
1 or 2	5
2 to 5	3
Over 5	1

Number of times explaining their faith – POST-SURVEY	
(7 respondents)	
Response	Number of Respondents
0	2
1 or 2	2
2 to 5	3
Over 5	0

Number of times explaining their faith – FINAL-SURVEY	
(8 respondents)	
Response	Number of Respondents
0	2
1 or 2	3
2 to 5	3
Over 5	0

This question showed less change compared to the previous question on prayer.

Overall, there were fewer people who responded with zero times of explaining something about their faith in the post and final surveys when compared to the pre-survey. That, however, could be accounted for by fewer participants in the latter two surveys. In examining the five individuals who completed all surveys, the numbers prove fairly static, however two specific individuals did show an increase. One individual increased

from zero times sharing in their pre-survey to three times in the final survey. Another increased from zero to four. These cases indicate that the class may have an impact on individuals in terms of personal faith-sharing, if not the group.

Qualitative Question in the Survey

The first question of all three surveys was the only qualitative question and asked, “How would you define evangelism?” The goal in asking this question was to gauge changes in language in how people articulated an understanding of evangelism. I was interested to see if the class experience impacted the description of evangelism people offered. Answers varied greatly among respondents. For analysis purposes I am going to limit my scope to the five participants I can track across all three surveys.

“How would you define evangelism?” Responses from five participants who responded to all surveys			
Participant	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey	Final Survey
1	Sharing the gospel of Jesus to those who either have not heard or choose to not believe	Sharing your faith to make disciples of Christ	Evangelism is communicating through actions and words to others about the Good News of Jesus Christ.
2	Telling others about Jesus	Sharing your testimony as well as telling people about God and salvation	Telling others about your faith. Also telling them about salvation.
3	Letting others know about Jesus	Telling others about Jesus Christ	Spreading the good news of Christ

4	Sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with others we know and meet in our everyday lives.	The desire to share the Good News of salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ which is available to all.	The ability to, and interest in, sharing the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ
5	Reaching out to others	Living your faith through your actions	Spread God's word to his people

While fascinating to see these various descriptions, I do not believe any significant conclusions can be derived from this data. There are perhaps some deepening of definitions among a couple of people. For example, participant 2 did seem to enhance their initial definition substantially. There are also a couple more instances of the word "salvation" and "Gospel or good news" in the post and final surveys. This language could have been picked up during the class.

Interview Analysis

Three individuals participated in interviews using Zoom video meeting technology. Due to the small number of class participants in general and asking for interviews on a volunteer basis, this number is smaller than I would have preferred. Still, even with the small number there are some helpful insights that can be gleaned.

Interview participant #1 is someone who has been involved with the church for a very long time and appears to have a more well-developed faith, gauging by vocabulary and comfort in discussing evangelism. When comparing the two interviews, this individual responded very similarly in each. One highlight that I noticed was in his second interview he noted, when asked about the most effective means for a church to reach new people, that is the people of the church, not programs that are most important.

While his response was similar to the first interview, his specific choice of language seemed to mirror class content in the final interview.

Interview participant #2 is also someone who has been heavily involved in church life and ministry activities for a number of years. She indicated significant experience with faith sharing and seemed comfortable with the topic of evangelism from the pre-interview. This seems to tie in with her having similar answers both before and after the class, similar to interview participant #1. One response of note in her interviews came in the second question of her final interview. When asked about the most effective means of a church reaching new people she included similar responses to her first interview, however she did add in extra language about the power of offering to pray for others. This language mirrored class content and is likely a result of participating in the class. This conclusion is consistent with survey findings.

Interview participant #3 was unique in comparison to the other two. She acknowledged being much less confident about faith-sharing from the beginning. She also shared about growing up in a religious tradition that discouraged talking about your faith with others. The two interviews with this participant demonstrated the most change. She expressed a better understanding of evangelism in the post interview. She also said she viewed sharing her faith as much easier, more understandable, and “more user-friendly.” Much of her early years in the faith she viewed evangelism as scary and intimidating. Overall, her final interview, compared to the pre-interview, exhibited much greater confidence in her ability to share her faith with others. She also used terms and language that were used in the class. The material did seem to have an effect on both her understanding and practice of evangelism.

In all of three of the interviews one of the more interesting components was hearing about each participant's perceived barriers to faith-sharing. There were similarities between participants in this regard. Each expressed some version of "not knowing enough." There was a feeling of lack in biblical knowledge or "knowing the right things to say." Another theme that surfaced related to the fear of how people would receive such spiritual conversation. I would summarize the two primary barriers as preparedness and lack of boldness. Both issues were addressed somewhat in the class, but each are instructive for potential future instruction. The boldness barrier would have been more specifically addressed with the experiential group activities originally planned for this project prior to the global pandemic.

Conclusion

In this project I have identified a significant need for the contemporary American church in the areas of evangelism instruction and practice. I have supported the need for this project historically, theologically, and biblically. Together these foundations led to the design and implementation of the specific evangelism training class outlined above with the hope that it might impact the faith-sharing understanding and practices of the individuals involved.

My overall sense, after examining all the data, is that this evangelism training class did have some effect on participants. This was noted significantly in one out of the three interview participants. It was also noted in the increased numbers of participants offering to pray more often for people outside their church and home. Some of this increase was subtle, but the survey data supports it.

The class is not a comprehensive solution for all the problems discussed in the opening chapter. The scope of a three-week online experience is limited. That being the case, I am encouraged by the survey and interview results. Even with the modified approach due to a global pandemic there were indications of practice change among participants. If a short class with an evangelism focus can yield even minimal results among average church goers, it suggests that church-sponsored instruction and experience could make an impact on how church members share their faith. It also suggests that Christians are interested in taking more ownership for faith-sharing rather than relying solely on church programs to reach family and friends. Participants expressed sincere desire to become more comfortable in talking about their Christian faith with others. This gives me hope for the contemporary church's ability to mobilize more members to engage in evangelism on a personal level. I have demonstrated earlier in this work why this is important, and through the implemented class and resulting data I have demonstrated that making progress is quite possible.

I believe these efforts are not only important but absolutely necessary as the church in America moves further into a post-Christian reality. If we are to make a shift in becoming missionaries to our culture once again it will not happen only through theories or programs. Everyday Christian people will have to get engaged in the propagation of the faith, and they can only do so effectively if they are both motivated and trained. Simple training experiences like the one outlined in the project are essential in making progress towards that end. There is no silver bullet available for instant change to the dramatic decline in American churches, however I believe training our current parishioners to view themselves as missionaries in the culture and giving them training to

act as such is a vital step in reversing that trend. The sort of training outlined here can be done in nearly any church with very few resources. My prayer is that more and more churches will begin with this simple step of equipping the laity for evangelism. I believe significant and eternal fruit could result.

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